

RELIGION AND THE
HIJAB VERDICT

THE CENTENARY OF
GANDHI'S TRIAL

THE
KASHMIR FILES
AS A
CATHARTIC EVENT

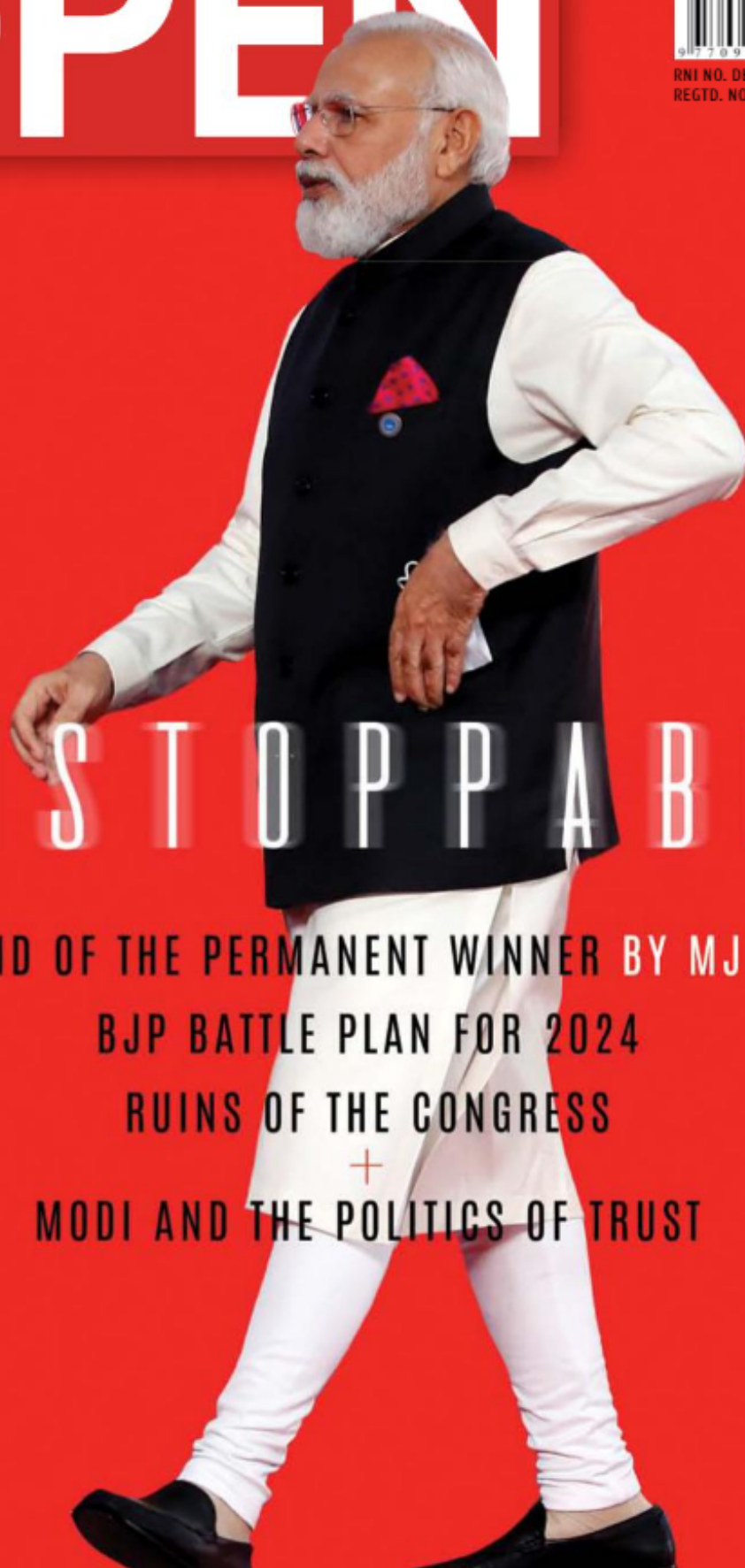
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28 MARCH 2022 / ₹60



RNI NO. DELENG/2009/27862
REGTD. NO DL (S)-17/3354/2021-23



UNSTOPPABLE

THE MIND OF THE PERMANENT WINNER BY MJ AKBAR

BJP BATTLE PLAN FOR 2024

RUINS OF THE CONGRESS

+

MODI AND THE POLITICS OF TRUST

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The outcome of the Assembly elections was once again a testimony to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political charisma, but it is the landslide victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Punjab that stunned everyone ('AAP Decimated Congress and SAD with a More Attractive Model of Populism, Changing the Political Map of a Traditional Two-Party State', March 21, 2022). The Punjab Assembly election results have caused all parties, including the big ones like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress, to introspect and identify the reasons for such a browbeating victory. Meanwhile, the consistently poor performance by Congress in Assembly elections is eclipsing all its efforts to retain its status of a national party. In the process, the public is now speculating if AAP is going to replace the grand old party in the years to come. The Arvind Kejriwal-led party has been gaining a foothold beyond Delhi. In the 2024 General Election, BJP is likely to come back to power with an emphatic win. However, it will not be so because it won Uttar Pradesh and other Assembly elections, but for two other reasons. First, the audacious arrival of AAP on the national political scene through its Punjab win will not only weaken Congress but also scuttle any effort at opposition unity. There is already a growing disenchantment among opposition parties towards AAP due to its rising popularity. Second, the remaining two years could be too short a period for AAP to expand its base enough to challenge BJP. However, the saffron party needs to be alert that AAP is now a force to reckon with.

Jaideep Mittra

NEW WORLD ORDER

The Russia-Ukraine conflict reminds us that there will never be an end to wars ('America Sought the Impossible, Russia the Unattainable', by MJ Akbar, March 14, 2022). It also points to Russia's growing expansionism. The post-Cold War period saw the emergence of a multipolar world. New democracies born of the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War heralded further expansion of NATO, and

the US assumed the role of a global policeman. The US and Russia have rubbed each other the wrong way.

MY Shariff

SPIN MASTER

Shane Warne's death was a shocking end to one of the finest spin bowlers of all time ('The Imperfect Perfectionist' by Boria Majumdar, March 21, 2022). Apart from being a classic leg spinner, Warne was also capable of leading a team to victory. The Indian Premier



League's first edition in 2008, when Rajasthan Royals led by Warne lifted the trophy, is proof of his captaincy skills. Cricket fans will miss the master of spin.

Vasudevan

A MISREADING

In reference to KR Srinivasan's letter published on March 7, 2022, the assertion that the Congress government overturned the Supreme Court ruling to pass "a new law...that said a husband needed to provide maintenance to his divorcee only during *iddat*" is a fundamental misreading of the Muslim Women (Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 ('Shah Bano 2.0', February 28, 2022). *Iddat* is the waiting period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or her divorce before she could marry another man. In its 2001 ruling, the Supreme Court held that far from overturning the Shah Bano judgment, what the Rajiv Gandhi government did was to "codify" it by making it obligatory for the husband to provide lifelong maintenance to his wife during the period of *iddat*.

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behalf of the owner, Open Media Network
Pvt Ltd Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd,
18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road,
Faridabad-121007 (Haryana) and
Published from 1st Floor, Tower 3A,
DLF Corporate Park, DLF City, Phase-III,
MG Road, Gurugram, Haryana-122002.
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Volume 14 Issue 12
For the week 22-28 March 2022
Total no of pages 68



Fortune India's 40 Under 40 issue is an annual feature where we identify 40 most promising young Entrepreneurs & Corporate honchos under the age of 40, in India across all disciplines. Fortune India invites nominations from potential contenders & industry leaders, which are further shortlisted by the jury & winners identified.

ON STANDS APRIL 2022

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

Modi and the Politics of Trust

The normalisation of Hindu nationalism

In politics it's the conviction of the present that gives the future its name. The present is a stage for constant reinvention for those types of politicians who see adversity as a curse. They withdraw from it, leaving behind the shards of slogans that once defined them. They are here as transition figures made winners by the error of others than by the ideas of their own. Politics is a performance of derision when they dominate the arena, and they still do. Politics is a play of conviction when redefinitions are formed, and arguments are rephrased, in the shared but suppressed vocabulary of a people. It is when change is an organic process, the only inevitability of conviction politics. Modi has become democracy's most popular pronoun of such change because it's the strength of his conviction rather than the much-analysed flaws and fragility of his adversaries that powers him.

He has not shifted from the argument since the summer of 2014, a time when, if it were not for his presence, it could have been a combat between politics as usual, or the entitlement of family inheritance, and politics as exhaustion and defeatism, or the aggrieved Right without a face. It was a time when the passions of one man aligned with the aspirations of an entire nation. To keep that balance was to break politics free from the cosy certainties of the left-liberal establishment that claimed copyright over national character. Every election Modi fought and won was a struggle to maintain that equilibrium, and he did so by not deviating from the original text of the outsider. In power he may be the strongman of the East with the mandate of democracy, but he still sees himself as the outsider who remains incomprehensible to those who block reality by rejecting the cultural shift that made him possible. Power as a permanent campaign for the future made every election a daring and a validation; it was not the so-called BJP machine or the grassroots wizards that made the craft of

winning look so natural. It was the restoration of trust in politics by the power of conviction.

It was the project of national redefinition. He did not borrow from the playbook of populism, even though there is a surfeit of comparative literature that puts him in the company of the Putins and the Erdogans. It's not by subordinating the institutions of civil society or silencing dissent that he has made the project a repudiation as well as renewal. Repudiation because he stood by his belief that the India he wanted to win was trapped in the artificialities of the Congress age in which 'the nation' was a taboo and 'secularism' was state-imposed sanctimony. He raged against the false inheritance. Renewal because what he believed to be Indianness was waiting to be set free. He undertook the project not by restricting the natural impulses of democracy but by capitalising on them. We are still naming the change; he has not finished yet.

What India is experiencing today is as culturally transformative as what it was going through after independence. Then: Managing freedom meant building on it a new India, and its architecture reflected the ideological refinement of the nation builder. For Nehru, the India that emerged out of colonialism required the best of what ideologies could offer, and he, a cultural sophisticate, found them in ideologies which had intellectual clarity about the future. The modern state would be shaped by the industrial vision of the Soviet model with a dash of controlled capitalism, and its inhabitants would be assembled, with the precision of an enlightened Frankenstein, from raw material collected from such lofty ideals as secularism and scientific temper, unsullied by instincts of national identity or religious primordialism. Today: In the grand project of Nation (Re)building, modernity would not be a rejection of traditions that formed the national identity, which didn't die under colonialism, Mughal or British. It was waiting for the trapdoors to open. The nation is back with a vengeance,



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Every movement is born in the mind of the one who dared to put moral conviction against political entitlement. It can be sustained only by making arguments for freedom less combative and more inclusive. The man who began it all has already shown, by the relentlessness of his conviction, that the modernisation project of the Hindu nationalist can do without outcasts and guidelines on national behaviour

and it seems the secular self can exist in perfect harmony with the original impulses of religion. It doesn't mean that the nation (re)builder needs to travel back to mythology to discover his cultural ancestry. The future is not a religious Ruritania either.

Religious nationalism is mainstream in Modi's India, and to make it look the natural, effortless identity of India is the most ambitious political project of our time. It is about rebuilding India on the fast-falling edifice of Nehru's modernity. It is about turning the aggrieved Hindu into the empowered Hindu; still, it is not about making a Hindu Republic. This distinction is important to Modi's national project: an expression of the Hindu self does not necessarily mean the creation of enemies; it should sound as inoffensive as Christendom. Modi himself does not make a rhetorical Hindu nation of religious absolutism in his stump speeches or in his conversation with Indians. He makes the perfect context for the politically armed Hindu to play out his nationalism. Modi may want it not as an imposition—borrowing from the book of the official secularist—but as a cultural homecoming. It is the catalyst's credo. His dignity—and the sophistication of being in power without the restraints of paranoia—is not shared by the base. It is the aesthetics of the Hindu Reawakening that mars the show occasionally.

The show of religious nationalism does not look archaic in India today. Modi in power has normalised it without a communal or cultural division of India. He has made it compatible with modernity—if modernity is not a rejection of civilisational memories. The verdict in Uttar Pradesh has shown how far India has travelled on the road to Hindu nationalism. Yogi Adityanath may not be the future, but he captures the spirit of the present: mobilisation of the redefined national identity, and its further normalisation. Adityanath is not the raw edge of the new cultural order; he is a vindication of how comfortable India has become in its political expressions with a pronounced religious accent. The interlocutors of the nation are made possible by the wider, grassroots acceptance of the national redefinition project. A monk in saffron robes, with a captive political base, as the chief minister of India's most influential state is not an anomaly but the inevitability in Modi's India. In the many synonyms of change, the ascending monk stands out because he personifies the argument against Nehru's secular construct. He is the starkest legacy of the Modi movement.

Every movement is born in the mind of the one who dared to put moral conviction against political entitlement. It can be sustained only by making arguments for freedom less combative and more inclusive. The man who began it all has already shown, by the relentlessness of his conviction, that the modernisation project of the Hindu nationalist can do without outcasts and guidelines on national behaviour. At times, he seems to be all alone in this project. He has India's trust. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

NOW, A DEGREE of Schadenfreude was unavoidable, particularly when the left-liberal cabal had virtually predicted the fall of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) days ahead of the actual results on March 10. It was their case that: a) there were no takers for the communal card this time round; and b) joblessness, Covid mismanagement, farmers' agitation, inflation, etc, would cook the saffron party's goose. The voter most disdainfully thumbed her nose at these armchair pundits who wear their anti-BJPism on their sleeves, while some of them seek BJP ministers' blessings in private. Lacking grace, when the results shattered their hopes, instead of a mea culpa, they were heard rebuking the voter, angry that she had ignored her miserable plight and voted back the terrible Yogi sarkar. Clearly, they deigned to possess superior wisdom while putting a low premium on the common sense of voters, who, after all, must have considered the alternative before re-electing the Bulldozer Baba. Such was the feeling of let down among the professional BJP baiters that one of them lamented that the "soul of India" was assailed by the foolish and ignorant voter. Such self-serving paternalism informed much of the commentary in the anti-BJP circles. Poor souls found it hard to reconcile themselves to the collective wisdom of the people, believing only what they knew was good for them.

WE MUST ADMIRE Robert Vadra's schutzhahn. Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law and Priyanka Gandhi's husband, days before the polling in UP, delivered himself to the pious sentiment to "serve the people." He said "everyone is expecting me to choose Moradabad"—the brassware town in UP from where the Vadra family hails—"or any other city in



Uttar Pradesh for entry into Parliament in 2024." This is not the first time the controversial businessman has expressed a desire to join active politics. Ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha polls as well he had reassured the nation that he was ready and willing to serve the people—"at the right time, I would join politics"—to rid the people of their woes. However, when that right time would come remains unclear. Meanwhile, he too must curse the voter for rejecting his wife's tireless effort to make Congress relevant again in their home state. For his part, he had left it to Priyanka to decide whether she wanted to be UP chief minister or "being a national leader, she wants to go on the national stage." Unfortunately, the accursed voter spared Mr and Mrs Vadra a very difficult dilemma, returning two Congress candidates for the 200 rallies she addressed in the campaign. Some would say not a bad strike rate at all, one seat each for every hundred meetings held by Vadra's "national leader".

THE AAM AADMI Party has been quick to ape the bad habits of the old and established players in the political arena, very often beating them at their own game. For instance, its spectacular success in the Punjab election has been achieved by the party embracing some of the

wealthiest candidates. Or some of the more notorious for alleged criminal activity. While nobody can detract from its trouncing of the Big Daddies of Punjab politics, including former Chief Ministers Parkash Singh Badal and Amarinder Singh, the fact remains that it now boasts the most number of winners with criminal cases. Also, according to the agile watchdog, the Association for Democratic Reforms, two of the wealthiest MLAs, one with declared assets of nearly ₹300 crore and another with ₹100 crore, grace the AAP bench. It remains to be seen who of the two 'Aam Aadmis' manages to become a minister in the comic-turned politician Bhagwant Mann's government—though there is nothing in the law to prevent both from being blessed with ministries. Meanwhile, the Punjab media reported how to make way for parking owing to the swearing in ceremony of the Mann government—over 40 acres of standing wheat crops were levelled with bulldozers. Of course, the caring AAP leadership would compensate the farm owners for the destruction of the crops—from the cash-starved treasury of the state government.

VIVEK AGNIHOTRI'S FILM *The Kashmir Files* has created quite a stir. It documents the real-life tragedies of countless Kashmiri Pandits who were made to flee their own ancestral homes in the early 1990s. Both the political class and the media were guilty of unseeing the cataclysmic, life-changing events happening before our own eyes. Belatedly, when the media had a chance to redeem itself, a New Delhi television channel panned the film as propagandist. Coming from a group reportedly tied to the little finger of the Gandhis, the description seemed rather rich. ■



The New World Disorder

A new multipolar structure of autonomous alliances beckons India

EVENTS IN UKRAINE have changed the trajectory of global affairs as decisively as the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago. What does the evolving world order look like?

In less than a decade, China's economy will be larger than America's. That is a seismic event. The US overtook Britain as the world's largest economy in the 1890s. Now, over a century later, the baton is set to pass to China.

The China-Russia axis is meanwhile developing into a geopolitical threat to the West: China is the putative economic superpower, Russia a resurgent military superpower. The alliance is a direct challenge to the global supremacy of the US-led West.

Who is to blame for this turn of events? Putin faces dissent at home. He has crushed it ruthlessly. His invasion of Ukraine has destabilised Europe.

The West enabled China for 30 years to gain technological parity on the assumption it would be a counterweight to Russia. The opposite has happened, driving Russia into China's arms. In a sign of how seriously Washington, London and Brussels take this new threat is the ferocious economic sanctions the West has imposed on Russia. But it has wisely refused to let the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) get involved in a military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.

Russia wants a written guarantee that Ukraine will never join NATO. The West's refusal could be a strategic error. Such errors have unintended consequences. Washington's misjudgement over Ukraine has set into motion a chain of events. They could cause a tectonic shift in the balance of global power.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Vladimir Putin was a 38-year-old KGB colonel in Leningrad. Within eight years, in 1999, he was president of Russia. For several years during the early 2000s, Putin flirted with the idea of aligning Russia—territorially emasculated and economically weakened after nearly a decade of Boris Yeltsin's corrupt presidency—with Western Europe. He even considered, briefly, applying for membership of the European Union.

In return, Europe gave him the cold shoulder. The US had become the sole superpower after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. NATO began to expand eastwards. Several East European countries lined up to join: Poland, Hungary

and the Czech Republic in 1999, followed by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Three key former Soviet states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—sharing a border with Russia were also made NATO members in 2004. After 2009, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia were eased into NATO. In two decades, NATO had expanded from 16 to 30 countries.

For over 40 years during the Cold War, the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact powers in eastern Europe had served as a military counterweight to NATO. In 1991, the balance of power shifted decisively. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact was dismantled; its seven founding members—ranging from Poland to Romania—are all today members of NATO.

For a while, recognising Russia's economic and military potential, the G7 in 1997 admitted Moscow to a newly minted G8. The idea was an old one: keep your enemies close. In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russia was "expelled" (the euphemism used was "removed") from the G8, which reverted to its old G7 format comprising the US, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan.

The irony escaped no one. All G7 members were active combatants in World War II; the first four were the

victorious Allies, the latter three, the defeated Axis powers.

Now, all seven had common cause and a common enemy: Russia. But by the time it was expelled from the G7 in 2014, Russia had become economically far stronger than it had been when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 sent a message to the West: the old world order was over. Washington, however, was now increasingly preoccupied with the rise of China. It believed that Russia was a European power, not a global threat to the US-led world order.

India's nuanced stand on Ukraine will now need to consider a new multipolar world of autonomous alliances. As a rising power, India can play a leading role when the dust settles in Ukraine. The world's three largest economies in 2030 will be the US, China and India. The world's three most powerful militaries in 2030 will be the US, Russia and China.

In those configurations lie clues to India's unfolding geopolitical strategy. ■

As a rising power, India can play a leading role when the dust settles in Ukraine. The world's three largest economies in 2030 will be the US, China and India. The world's three most powerful militaries in 2030 will be the US, Russia and China



Food for Thought

Kebabs in shot glasses and other atrocities

WHO WOULD HAVE imagined the onslaught of the many on the few over some basic truths? Especially concerning food. India today thinks it has rediscovered itself as far as food is concerned but the harsh reality is that not much has changed, no matter how much we would like lasagna to replace *luchis*. Many in elite circles will present cheese platters as if they were to the cow born but then again give someone Amul over the fanciest Gouda, and you will see their exultation.

I have never understood the rush to embrace cuisines that we neither appreciate nor can cook. With all these celebrity chefs floating all over the place, it is getting impossible to get even a basic masala omelette right. In the good old days, the citadel of good food was in its simplicity until these goddamn celebrity chefs arrived. Today, if you ask for a chicken sandwich, they make it sound as if you are asking for their hand in marriage. Even street food has been bastardised to an extent that is both anguishing and nauseating. Dolts now want to serve you chocolate Maggi, or for that matter vodka *golgappas* which we puritans still call *phuchkas*.

The demise of the simple dal is even more telling. Dhabas that served the authentic version are now poor imitations of their past selves. Try and ask for a simple chicken curry in any restaurant in India and the chances are you will get about 17 dishes that taste the same, look the same, except for the meat they use. Such is the tragedy with Indian food today.

If terrible chefs were not enough, you now have miserable food writers. They will write about the most complex just so they sound global and knowledgeable, but the truth is all they are hankering after is a free meal.

Add to this the various health fads that keep surfacing from time to time. And I haven't even begun talking about diets and that silly intermittent fasting bit. In the good old days when you went to a south Indian restaurant, you were sure to get a simple dosa made in a simple way. Today, there are options that are plain ridiculous. If I wanted a millet

dosa, I would check into a health farm and not dine out. What makes matters worse is pretentious company that will then bore you with the goodness of various ingredients and then force you to have some really crappy food.

Even glorious cities, famed for their food, have become either tourist traps or worse still (desperate to be featured by some avant-garde writer), turned into indescribable eating destinations. More recently, I was in Amritsar, and to get the commonplace mutton tikka, was like trying to find Navjot Singh Sidhu after the Punjab election results. I still remember there was a time when Amritsar, in terms of

food, lived through its handcars: those handcars today sell bangles and fake purses while real food has disappeared. I still remember when this fraudulent Grand Chef of one of the leading hotel chains began to serve the humble mutton seekh kebab in shot glasses: by the time you took the kebab out of the glass, you were as sullied as Putin is today.

The art of staying pure and simple is over. Just like in everything else, we have begun to complicate food as well. Much to the detriment of people who will grow up to eat burgers filled with plant-based meat with whatever the hell it means.

There are still some oases of excellence, but it won't be long

before they succumb too. Thank God for clubs in our country and I am not talking about the ones that play despicable music but the ones that distinguish between a Negroni and a sherry. Clubs are still the last resort if you want anything authentic of that city or region. These clubs will remain our last hope until some fancy idiot comes and takes over the menu, promising better health and longer living.

Of what use is good health and long life if you can't savour a mutton cutlet without the mutton being vegetarian, or what will you do with a chicken *chaat* which is without mayonnaise, or live poorly just because you've been told by some grandee that your French onion soup has replaced the Gruyère with some sad broccoli?

You might as well be dead. ■

THE ART OF STAYING PURE AND SIMPLE IS OVER. JUST LIKE IN EVERYTHING ELSE, WE HAVE BEGUN TO COMPLICATE FOOD AS WELL. MUCH TO THE DETRIMENT OF PEOPLE WHO WILL GROW UP TO EAT BURGERS FILLED WITH PLANT-BASED MEAT WITH WHATEVER THE HELL IT MEANS. THERE ARE STILL SOME OASES OF EXCELLENCE, BUT IT WON'T BE LONG BEFORE THEY SUCCUMB TOO

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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

A Court Gets It Right on Hijab

IN THE THREE days since the Karnataka High Court gave its verdict on March 15 in a slew of petitions around the hijab row, much ink has been spilled on how the court got it wrong. If anything, the verdict of the court gives a glimmer of hope that secularism, shorn of abuse—by political parties and liberals alike—may see better days.

The brawl—and there is no other way to describe what transpired—started at the Government PU College in Udupi, Karnataka, in early February. The state government order prescribing uniforms for students turned into a match for identity politics. The issue then ballooned into a law and order problem, forcing the state government to close educational institutions in a bid to control the situation.

Within no time, a number of students approached the High Court praying that they be allowed to wear the hijab in their college as it was an “essential practice of Islam.” When the court delivered its judgment, its response was based on what the petitioners had demanded in the first place that wearing the hijab be declared an essential practice of Islam.

It seems incongruous that a court in an avowedly secular country should be indulging in an exegetical exercise to declare what is essential and what is not in a religion. There is a long history of courts using this method to handle tricky questions about the role and place of religion in public life. In the Karnataka case, it was not on its own initiative that the court used this method: it was specifically asked to do so. But that did not prevent controversy in the days that followed.

The broad trend, especially among liberal commentators, has been to decry the court for not considering the hijab as a freedom of choice issue. A cognate argument is that Indian secularism allows religious symbols and practices in the public sphere. A third argu-

ment that has been proffered is that banning the hijab directly impinges on the right of women students to education. These are ‘activist’ arguments that did not form part of the case before the court. There, the narrow question was whether the hijab was an essential religious practice in Islam. These questions, however, merit a broader response.

It is interesting to note that in this particular case, the issue of secularism has been sidestepped by Indian liberals. Their contention is that secularism in India is about the equidistance of the state from all religions and not the banning or restriction of religious symbols in the public sphere. This is a curious argument. The usual liberal claim is that religion is a private matter that is about the faith and belief of individuals. But when it comes to Islam, the issue of group rights (as enshrined in Article 26 of the Constitution) is never far behind in their calculation. The question that is yet to be settled is whether religious choices of individuals should extend to the public sphere. The ideal answer is that religious symbols have no place in the public sphere. But this is an answer that is unacceptable to liberals who have prefixed the adjective “asymmetric” before anything that deals with Islam in India: From “asymmetric

federalism” in the case of the erstwhile, Muslim majority, state of Jammu and Kashmir to “asymmetric secularism” in the case of minorities.

This is the explanation for the shift of gears from the usual emphasis on collective rights (Article 26) to individual freedoms (Article 19) in this case. This is a slippery slope. But because liberals are engaged in a last stand for ‘secularism’, the slippage is acceptable.

Another claim is that banning the hijab robs women students of education. This claim holds no water at all. If the right to education is so important—that is, it is ranked higher than the right to wear

The usual liberal claim is that religion is a private matter that is about the faith and belief of individuals. But when it comes to Islam, the issue of group rights (as enshrined in Article 26 of the Constitution) is never far behind in their calculation. The question that is yet to be settled is whether religious choices of individuals should extend to the public sphere. The ideal answer is that religious symbols have no place in the public sphere. But this is an answer that is unacceptable to the liberals



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

a hijab—surely, there is no problem: women students are not being prevented from entering any educational institution. But this is a fake argument: the real issue is that women should be allowed to wear a hijab. The right to education has been attached for PR purposes.

The essential practices test gave a negative answer to the hijab question. But the positive answer for the ban comes from a very different and underused aspect of Constitutionalism in India. This was the court's emphasis on the Fundamental Duty of every citizen "to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities..." (Article 51A(e)). Using this part of the Constitution, the court gave a positive reason for the actions of the state government.

Politically, the politics of secularism now panders to the most regressive sentiments that prevail in society. It is a travesty that liberals—the class that should be helping the country overcome these tendencies—are now furthering them. In this, India seems to have come full circle.

In 1954, when the essential practices test was first used—interestingly, in a case from Udipi, the Shirur Mutt case—India was a very different country. At that time, heavy-handed government intervention in the affairs of religious institutions, in the garb of regulating their 'secular' activities—mostly their financial and administrative affairs—was considered necessary for 'reforms' of these institutions. The weapon of choice was the essential practices test. It was used extensively to cleave anything that came in the way of alleged reforms. The executive would take steps and the courts would then use the essential practices test to justify

what the government did. The courts effectively functioned as religious interpreters, a role they should have eschewed.

In this journey that began with the Shirur Mutt case (1954) and continued until the Sabarimala case (2018), the judicial hammer fell disproportionately on Hindu customs and traditions. But the community accepted these verdicts even if unhappily so. In recent years, there has been extensive debate and the demand now is that courts move away from using this test and refrain from interfering in religious matters. With the hijab case, the Muslim community has also joined this chorus. Liberal opinion—that fully supported the essential practices test for decades—also wants to do away with it. The liberal reason is political, even if it remains unstated: Courts are unable to resist 'majoritarianism', and hence, it is best if they refrain from adjudicating in these matters.

It is not so simple to accede to this demand. As said earlier, it would have been better for the courts not to interfere in religious matters. But at this late stage, with competing and often antagonistic reasons for courts to step back, the danger of a free for all in a highly polarised society is very real. This is a situation that will please no one. There is a case for the courts to be careful in interpreting religion. But there is one area—public order, irrespective of religion—where courts should liberally use the essential practices test. The way out of what began with the Shirur Mutt case will be complicated and tough. The path requires judicial sagacity and eschewing of activism on the part of the courts. ■

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

IN MEMORIAM • WILLIAM HURT (1950-2022)

ALWAYS IN CHARACTER

The Oscar-winning actor was best assaying roles that had a touch of darkness in them

IN THE 1980S when Hollywood moved further into the blockbuster era, with the continuing popularity of the Star Wars movies and those of Steven Spielberg's, an alternative arose in the films of William Hurt and a few others. Hurt, who died recently of cancer at the age of 71, played lead roles in slow-burning thrillers, bringing an air of sophistication and nuance in genre roles. He played the male lead in some of 1980s' most memorable films, three of these – *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) and *Broadcast News* (1987) – earning him best actor Oscar nominations in three consecutive years. He won for the first, but he could have easily won for the other two as well.

Speaking in a measured voice, his blonde hair receding to reveal a high forehead, Hurt brought a cerebral quality to the characters he played. According to a film reviewer, if he had possessed a more conventional face, he could have probably had Robert Redford's career. Hurt was best when these characters had a hint of evil in them, a little allowance of immorality and vanity, or sometimes, just a bit of dimness. So, in the steamy thriller *Body Heat* (1981), if he was playing a lawyer with a fatal desire for a married woman, in the romcom-cum-media satire *Broadcast News*, he was playing a handsome and not quite bright (and unethical) reporter who gets promoted to anchor much to the chagrin of more deserving colleagues. In *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, he played a gay inmate

spinning stories in a South American prison. According to the *New York Times* review of that movie, "Hurt won a well-deserved best actor award at the Cannes Film Festival for a performance that is crafty at first, carefully nurtured and finally stirring in profound, unanticipated ways. What starts out as a campy, facetious catalog(ue) of Hollywood trivia becomes an extraordinarily moving film about manhood, heroism and love."

Hurt came to the movies reluctantly. The son of a career diplomat and a media executive, Hurt had built a growing reputation on stage. He, it is said, had turned down several movie offers, until he was persuaded by a producer to act in a sci-fi thriller (*Altered States*, 1980).

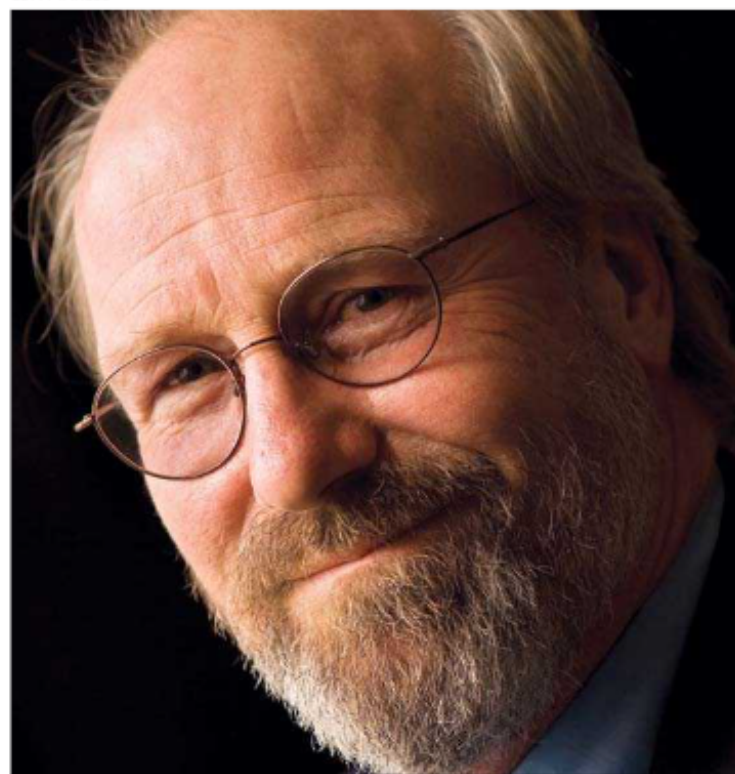
But while his performances drew rave reviews, his personal life remained turbulent. Two marriages ended in divorce. A long-term relationship landed in court. Another partner, his *Children of a Lesser God* co-star Marlee Matlin, revealed in her autobiography how he inflicted physical and sexual abuse on her. Hurt also drank heavily for a particular spell in his life, and bounced in and out of rehab clinics. He apologised for many of these allegations, and appeared to have made some peace with these aspects of his life later on. "It's [fame] a privilege and a responsibility, and I'm not sure I carried the responsibility well at times, which is embarrassing. And I've had to look and be disappointed in myself occasionally for how I behaved in some circumstances," he said in a 2013 interview to *The Telegraph*.

On screen, too, his lustre somewhat faded. He had once described himself as a character actor trapped in a leading man's body in the 1980s. And now, as the next decade wore on, he freed himself up picking more character roles, even in films that weren't very good. It was *A History of Violence* (2005), where he played a loathsome gangster hunting his own brother and for which he was nominated for an Oscar, that heralded something of a comeback.

He also became a fixture in the sort of blockbuster projects he had provided an alternative to in the 1980s, playing the recurring role of General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross in the Marvel movies. In the Marvel films, the character of General Ross is more closely connected with the Hulk storyline. And while the actor who plays that superhero has had to be changed twice (from Eric Bana to Edward Norton, before settling on Mark Ruffalo), the character of General Ross, a role Hurt brings an elderly sternness to, even in its brief screen-time, has never required such an intervention. ■

By LHENDUP GBHUTIA

GETTY IMAGES



ANGLE

THE OPEN SOCIETY



A welcome question mark on sealed covers by the Supreme Court

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

THIS WAS THE week the sealed cover made a reappearance but, for once, in a salutary way. There was the Supreme Court Chief Justice NV Ramana refusing to accept one with the words, as the legal website Live Law reported: “Don’t give any sealed covers. Keep it with you, I don’t want any sealed cover.” Another court, too, had something to say. The report said: “In a related development, a bench led by Justice Chandrachud indicated today that it will consider the legal tenability of the “sealed cover” process in the MediaOne case.”

The sealed cover flouts ideas of justice as we know it. You expect government agencies to be wary of sharing information because it works in their interest. Any action against anyone must be legal and based on reasoning. But how do the people know if it’s sound if they are not told anything? The judiciary is by default an open institution. Judgments and orders record facts, both sides of an argument, and then spell out why the verdict is what it is. The sealed cover takes away that window of transparency, too, for sunlight to disinfect.

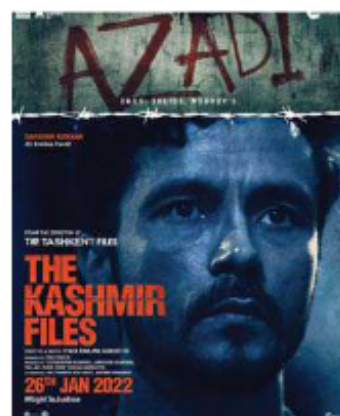
In the MediaOne case, the television channel from Kerala was refused a renewal of licence by the government, which in the high court cited national security along with a sealed cover. MediaOne therefore didn’t know why the action had been taken against it, and obviously could make no counter-arguments. The high court upheld the government’s position. The Supreme

Court has now stayed it and permitted the channel to air. It is welcome because transparency is both necessary and good. For example, if the airing of MediaOne is a danger to national security, then there is no reason for people to not know it. There is no reason for the government to not tell it. But the Indian state is often too lazy or incompetent to collect hard evidence. Plus, it has a long history of infantilising its citizens, as subjects with no ability to decide what is good and bad, right and wrong. The sealed cover makes the judiciary party to this shenanigan. The term “national security” puts judges on the back foot because they don’t want to take a chance.

But once the Pandora’s box is opened, then something as ominous is not needed anymore. When the Board of Control for Cricket in India committee gave the Supreme Court a sealed cover with names of cricketers who had been named in match-fixing, what national security considerations could have been involved? The idea that the judiciary was a place where it was alright to have private conversations, had become normalised. Hopefully, there is sustained throwback against this mechanism.

Even if there is a role for secrecy in government—which itself is questionable—the judiciary must be the opposite because it is a check on the government. That is why Cabinet ministers take an oath of secrecy and judges do not. ■

IDEAS



TAX EXEMPTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a filmmaker in possession of a good connection must be in want of some tax exemption. The recently-released film *The Kashmir Files*, which depicts the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, has secured tax exemption from many states, most of them under BJP. Waiving off entertainment tax can, as the argument goes, help push movies with social welfare or patriotic messages more widely, or encourage filmmakers to pick such subjects. Filmmakers hardly need such prodding anymore as films with strong social messages have become the Bollywood mainstay. And very often, films that get tax breaks are those whose makers have good ties with ruling parties. It is time to drop this practice for good. ■

WORD’S WORTH

‘Death, taxes and childbirth! There’s never any convenient time for any of them’

MARGARET MITCHELL
US AUTHOR



Institutional Atrophy

Showcasing JNU in India's culture wars

THIS IS THE book that I almost did not write. And after it was written in the most unexpected fashion, I was almost prevented from publishing it. I won't say much more about that unfortunate part of its birth story. But do I believe that a concerted attempt was made to cancel this book. It was done by asking for over 180 edits, omissions, and rewrites, which I refused to carry out. Instead of succumbing to censorship, I took back my rights.

What happened to me was not only unusual, but unexpected. The world of Indian publishing is very small. We all know and work with each other. In the course of my career as a writer spanning over four decades and 50 books, I must have published with most major Indian publishers, either doing an independent book for them or contributing a chapter in an edited volume.

By and large, my experience has been good. Even in this case, the people involved were most apologetic. I might even say that we parted company on amicable terms. I promised not to name names when I brought our agreement to an end. I intend to keep my word. Because that is the honourable thing to do. But I am happy that my book has finally come out, thanks to my current publisher, Rupa Publications.

This is a wholly indigenous publishing venture, without any foreign tie-ups, currently led by Kapish Mehra. I have known Kapish since he was a boy, and his father, RK Mehra, for over 30 years. Mehra Senior published my first volume of poetry, *The Serene Flame*, way back in 1991, in the Rupa new poetry line curated by the late great Nissim Ezekiel. Many a notable contemporary Indian English poet emerged from the darkness of obscurity in that series. Subsequently, Rupa also published my second volume of poems, two of my novels, in addition to two edited volumes, one on Sarojini Naidu and another on new Indian English poets.

But to return to my book, it would not be an exaggeration to say that its contents were unprecedented. I had never planned to join JNU, let alone write a book on its tumult and transformation. How both came to pass is recounted in these pages. The book, however, is not merely a collection

of anecdotes or personal experiences. Nor is it an exercise in institutional historiography or hagiography.

My colleague, Rakesh Batabyal's *JNU: The Making of a University* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2015) comes close to such an endeavour. On the other hand, *JNU Stories: The First 50 Years*, edited by Neeladri Bhattacharya, Kunal Chakrabarti, S Gunasekaran, Janaki Nair and Joy LK Pachau (New Delhi: Aleph, 2021) is a collection of reminiscences of those who were a part of JNU from the earliest times.

My book is quite different. It is an informed insider's account of the cataclysmic changes in one of India's premier institutions of higher education during a five-year period, 2016-21. But more than that, I would like to believe that this book is also a history of our times, of India's ongoing transformation. It is the story of the changing self-apprehension of a people, of the multiple meanings of nationalism. It is about being Indian itself.

JNU, as I show, is at the centre of discussions and debates on topics of national importance. It always has been. So that is not what makes these times special. What is different now is that the university, which went through an unprecedented crisis, was the location and theatre of this larger change.

As this book hits the stands, JNU's future as a coveted destination for students from all over India, as also from abroad, is in question. The image of the university has taken a severe beating in the last five years. Given so much negative publicity, many parents do not wish to send their children to study here. What, then, will happen to this once-prized, premier university? Will it weather this crisis? Will it actually emerge stronger and more stable? Will it be downgraded into just another failed institution of higher learning, such as dot the intellectual landscape of our country?

In its larger context, this book tries to find answers to such questions. It also provides a corrective to the excessive condemnation and denigration of JNU. It is a plea to save the university, to safeguard its culture of democracy and dissent, as also to restore academics, rather than politics, to the pole position. As such, the book critiques the dominant, mostly

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



THE BATTLE FOR JNU'S HEART AND SOUL IS NOT YET OVER. AS THE UNIVERSITY LIMPS BACK TO NORMAL AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THE CAMPUS REMAINS RIVEN BETWEEN OPPOSING STUDENT CAMPS, THE ADMINISTRATION QUITE DYSFUNCTIONAL, AND THE FINANCES IN THE DOLDRUMS

leftist student and faculty politics at the university.

But while it deplores the ideological hegemony and intolerance of the left in JNU, arguing that it has brought the university to such a sorry pass, this book also makes a case for not simply substituting the dogmatic left with the doctrinaire right. Or using the sledgehammer approach to crush and pulverise all opposition to the current regime, which the present JNU administration is supposed to represent.

The book pleads for the restoration of civil disagreement in place of bitter opposition, dialogue rather than irreconcilable conflict. It proposes remedial strategies of dealing with differences, along with intermedial hermeneutics to negotiate extreme positions and bipolar oppositions. Intermedial hermeneutics demands a humane, non-reductive way of understanding texts and traditions, individuals and society, as well as the conflicts such as in JNU. More specifically, when applied to JNU, it shows the way to create a new JNU in which academics rather than politics

constitute the primary purpose of the university.

As to the specific circumstances of this book's genesis, much of it emerged out of my continuous public engagement with the happenings in JNU since February 2016. Not so much written from scratch or from some vantage point in the present, it is, rather, a record of my own ongoing involvement in my university. My point of view is not that of an administrator or activist, but as a concerned member of the faculty and tax-paying citizen. Also, as a social, political and intellectual stakeholder and influencer in what is now a much larger argument about our changing republic.

An attempt was made to turn the university into a platform against the Narendra Modi-led BJP government, which was voted to power in 2014. The university was shut down, classes suspended, the administration building occupied, and the campus became a pitched battleground between two ideologies, political orientations, and ideas of India.

Rather than being a silent spectator, I was drawn into the vortex of this conflict. That is because I took a stand against the kind of "azadi" or freedom that a section of the students was championing. This cry for freedom, far from being the idealistic or innocent passion of the youth, was tantamount to a cry of secession from the Indian state, at least as it was articulated by a small section of the student body that openly supported Kashmiri separatists. Many of the other students who stood with them did not, I believe, fully understand the implications of this agitation.

Today, watching Vivek Agnihotri's trending and deeply stirring film, *The Kashmir Files*, I am taken back to those times in 2016 when student protests were engineered not only on JNU but across the nation's leading universities, including University of Hyderabad, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), and Jadavpur University. An insurrection of the youth across the country against the Modi *sarkar* was the real aim of the movement.

Looking back, one might say that the battle for India has been won. At least for now. Not once, but twice, after Modi returned to power with an even more popular mandate in 2019. If the recent Uttar Pradesh election results are anything to go by, this trend of popularity and power now extends to Yogi Adityanath, too.

But the battle for JNU's heart and soul is not yet over. As the university limps back to normal after the Covid-19 pandemic, the campus remains riven between opposing student camps, the administration quite dysfunctional, and the finances in the doldrums. But we have a new vice-chancellor, Professor Santishree Dhulipudi Pandit, herself a JNU alum, and the first woman to head our university.

I hope she can apply the healing touch and that we shall see better days ahead after these tumultuous five or six years past. In my book, I provide a blueprint of how excellence can be foregrounded and JNU can become great again. ■



Pride and Passion

Revisiting the IPL story as a new season begins

SEASON 15 IS upon us and it is perhaps pertinent to take a look at the journey thus far. First things first, the Indian Premier League (IPL) has resulted in an unprecedented windfall for the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and for franchise owners of the original eight competing teams, a number that has now gone up to 10. Contrary to initial fears, the board earned ₹350 crore from the inaugural edition itself in 2008, much more than its entire profit of ₹235 crore in 2007 from overall operations. While these numbers seem very small sitting in 2022, in 2008 they were huge figures and helped lay the foundation. Even before the semi-finals were played, 99 million viewers had tuned in to watch IPL matches in April-May 2008. Several franchise owners like Shah Rukh Khan had recovered a major part of their investment in Year One itself. It is this unprecedented success of IPL—repeated for 14 straight years between 2008 and 2021—that helped consolidate India's position as world cricket's centre of gravity and completed the process of Indian cricket's financial takeover of the global game.

APPREHENSIONS

BCCI's decision to put iconic cricketers under the commercial hammer in February 2008 met with vociferous opposition from more than one quarter. Moralists and politicians throughout India were up in arms against this public auctioning of the country's biggest stars, even threatening to raise the issue in Parliament. BCCI, however, was unfazed. BCCI led by Lalit Modi at the time believed in the spectacle and was willing to travel the distance. So what, if you *bought* Sachin Tendulkar? Could you imagine the thrill in seeing MS Dhoni being *sold*? How exciting was the prospect of possessing the man who had won India the World Cup or a legend who is deemed the god of the sport! You could now *buy* them at an auction. The very thought was enough to rouse fan passion and, more importantly, investor interest.

There were, however, a host of key questions that confronted BCCI before the start of IPL: Would the benefits of monetisation of the players filter down to the grassroots and contribute to improving the domestic cricket

superstructure? Would fans come out to spend their hard-earned money and watch games in the oppressive heat of April and May?

The question of fan participation was pertinent because, in India, fans generally only ever attended international cricket contests, where countries are pitted against each other. Nationalism, in other words, has been at the core of cricket-watching in India. Meanwhile, Indian domestic contests such as the Ranji Trophy or Duleep Trophy, even when major Indian stars are playing, hardly attract more than 1,000 spectators per match.

It was also conjectured that faced with teams made up of random conglomerations of players, the draw for most spectators was less the game and more the entertainment on offer. But would fans really want to be merely 'entertained' for seven straight weeks? Even in terms of television viewership, IPL—pitted against soaps and reality-television shows—faced stiff competition. Finally, it was hotly debated if the benefits of the new league could ultimately serve as a supply line for future national stars.

A SUCCESS STORY LIKE NO OTHER

There's little doubt that April 18, 2008, will go down in cricket history as the day the game changed forever. Modelled on Major League Baseball and the National Football League, IPL had come at a time when the Indian economy had opened itself to global riches and big corporates were trying to make India home and were in search of lucrative investment platforms across the country. IPL, for many, was the answer. At one go, it had given them a foothold in a market of a billion-plus and generated eyeballs that millions of dollars spent on advertisements wouldn't garner. Add to this the fact that for a billion-plus cricket fans, filling stadiums was hardly difficult with proper marketing and hype. With celebrity owners like Shah Rukh Khan and leading Bollywood stars doing their bit in earnest, fans had more than cricket on offer for a few hundred rupees—a great evening out at a reasonable price. In addition, with fans thronging the grounds or picking their seat in front of the TV set, sponsors queued up and paid millions for ten-second slots, on instadia hoardings and team apparel.

With each of the seasons hugely successful, most matches getting sold out and with national cricket boards seemingly making room for it, IPL never looked back. More importantly, BCCI knew that the International Cricket Council (ICC) would not want to oppose it. The one time ICC clashed with innovative private entrepreneurship in the 1970s, it was humiliated at the hands of Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer, an episode described the best by Gideon Haigh in his book *The Cricket War*. Says Gideon, "Once the game had a price put on it, it became a commodity ripe for commercial exploitation. The only question was whether it could remain more than that. Perhaps the only surprise is that privateers have not revisited it with similarly grandiose visions. But perhaps that emphasises how audacious Packer's scheme was. Packer came at a moment when it could hardly have been more unthinkable to the authorities, off the back of the Centenary Test, when cricket was hugging itself with glee. But I also think that World Series Cricket evolved. When Packer first recruited players, he was not so piratical. He simply wanted players for what were not much more than made-for-TV exhibition matches, to compensate for having been denied the broadcast rights he had sought in 1976. It was the action of the authorities in trying to impose bans on players, restrict access to venues, etc that intensified the roll-out."

If IPL did the same, control of the game's most lucrative version could well slip away from ICC's hands because IPL is that unique tournament that inspired English players to revolt against their own board and, for which, Australian cricketers contemplated giving up the coveted baggy green cap.

Even when the league had moved to South Africa in 2009, at short notice, because of its clash with India's General Election, its popularity hardly waned. Half-full grounds or less than animated spectators in Durban or Cape Town could be perceived as blips only when IPL Season 2 was compared to the packed stands and wild spectators back home in its inaugural edition.

THE STORY GOES ON

In the course of the 14 years since the inception of IPL, I have spent time with multiple teams and owners and

have been amazed at the kind of passion the league generates. For example, the entire senior management of one of the teams used to leave the hotel together around 2PM on match days to offer pujas for the team. They would never be a minute late, and the kind of discipline shown in performing this ritual was unbelievable. That the team did not have the best results is a different matter altogether.

Team owners, men and women who run big corporations, are not as tense in their business meetings as during IPL games. One team owner clutches a worn-out picture of his family deity for the whole time a match is on, and every

wicket falling or boundary scored is greeted by a *pranaam*. Surrounded by friends and family, an IPL owner's box best defines the complex Indian modernity of today. Most people in this box wear expensive clothes and watches, carry fancy phones with powerful cameras and drive to the stadium in luxury cars. But when it comes to the game itself, they turn into devout god-fearing Indians who pray for the success of their teams. So what, if they are not playing or have themselves never played the game? Prayers, many feel, are enough to win cricket games. *Prashad* is passed on to the team members hours before the game and everything from vastu to feng shui is tried out. Team names and jersey colours have been altered to align better with the stars, and it is fandom of a very different nature that makes IPL a very different beast in comparison to international cricket.

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



THE FUTURE

We already have the first IPL unicorn in the Chennai Super Kings (CSK). They are now valued at a billion dollars and chances are will double their valuation in the next 10 years. With Covid gradually becoming endemic and with vaccines doing the job, the Indian economy is expected to fare much better in the years to come. Sport will be a major beneficiary. People will want to invest in sport because estimates worldwide show that the returns are at times twenty to fiftyfold on monies invested in sport. IPL too is a fair proof of concept. CSK, which was bought for ₹400 crore, is now valued 25 times higher. And with Indian cricket growing in strength and people's consumption patterns turning more and more aggressive, there's no doubt IPL as a brand isn't going to lose its sheen in the next decade. ■



Club Istanbul

Identity markers in a new Turkish series echo the melodrama of Hindi cinema

LIKE TO JOKE that I go clubbing in India. Not to nightclubs but to the old-fashioned comfortable clubs—the Bengal Club, the Madras Club, the Ooty Club, the Tolly(gunge) Club, but most of all the Royal Bombay Yacht Club where I have been staying for 30 years.

These are very different from the nightclubs seen in the Hindi films which seem to have some tenuous connection with reality described in Naresh Fernandes' *Taj Mahal Foxtrot: The Story of Bombay's Jazz Age*, but formed the backdrop for some of the best songs in the history of Hindi cinema.

The Hindi film nightclub scene has evolved into new forms from new club music and the item song, but it was the club as a place of modernity with its edgy air of glamour, wealth, crime, alcohol and dangerous women that had its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. They were sometimes crazily styled with bizarre props, but sometimes they were plain stages with Anglo-Indian or foreign-looking dancers (often in blonde wigs), and Western or Goan/Anglo-Indian bands.

The dancers added extra oomph to any film, whether Helen, Cuckoo or Shashikala. There are so many great songs, I couldn't even begin to choose my Top 10, but I have a special affection for Shakti Samanta's *Howrah Bridge* (1958). OP Nayyar and Qamar Jalalabadi's two brilliant nightclub songs are both classics. Madhubala as Anglo-Indian Edna sings 'Aaiye meherban' to Ashok Kumar, while Geeta Dutt sings for Helen the classic 'Mera naam Chin Chin Choo'. This is one of Helen's earliest hit songs and rather than a blonde wig, is a singer from Shanghai via Singapore, dressed in a *qipao* dress. The rock and roll beat and chorus remains catchy even after six decades: 'Mera naam Chin Chin Chu/Chin Chin Chu Baba Chin Chin Chu/Raat Chandni main aur tu/Hello Mister how do you do?'

When Shammi Kapoor became the Elvis of India, his brilliant song 'Baar baar dekho'—a celebration of the invitation to look at him in *Dil Deke Dekho* (1959) had him cavorting in a jacket and checked shirt and polka dot cravat, singing a haunting chorus, 'Tally ho'.

However, what took me back to the old nightclub of the Hindi film was the Turkish series, *The Club* (*Kulüp*)

(2021), directed by Zeynep Günay Tan. This beautifully shot series centres on the Club Istanbul, in central Istanbul, an oasis of modernity, as gorgeous as a Mumbai art deco theatre. The present is 1955 but there are many flashbacks to the youth of Matilda (the brilliant Gökçe Bahadır), who grew up in the minority Turkish Jewish community of Istanbul.



The melodramatic plot focuses on identity. Who is Matilda and why does she have such beautiful things and such striking grace? What is the crime for which she was imprisoned before working as a cleaner, then assistant in the club? Why does Çelebi (Firat Tanis), the manager of the club, seem to hate her and who is he? Who is the father of her daughter Raşel (note: a great name) and how will

her problematic relationship with taxi driver Fıstık İsmet settle? Why is Orhan close to the authorities and why does his mother's dementia seem to make her the saner?

The series has two main political moments. One is 1942 when Matilda's wealthy Jewish family is ruined by the Varlık Vergisi, or tax on non-Muslims in Turkey, and the other are the 1955 Istanbul riots which were mostly against Greek minorities but also against other business communities, notably the Jewish and the Armenian.

The minorities in the film belong to two main diasporas who prospered in Istanbul over centuries. The significant characters are Jewish, but the series also depicts Istanbul's Greeks, Orthodox Christians who live lives of great elegance and wealth. Members of both minorities hide their identities by simply changing their names.

The series shows the trauma of individual and of the group, focusing on minorities and diasporas. The relationships between communities are often set, as in other melodramas, as love stories or family stories, where Jewish women fall in love with Muslim men, mothers

may ultimately protect them. *The Club* allows clothes to be another way of creating new identities which can be expressed and enjoyed only within its limits.

The characters' own families may be absent—lost, alienated or killed—but they form new families and new relationships based on love, which heals even deep wounds. Music, love and passion are the ways in which they find themselves as fortunes change in a turbulent political world with rising divisions and religious nationalism.

The taxi driver (who doesn't think of Dev Anand?) is the modern man whose mobility allows him to move around the city, learn English, and have a wealthy foreign lover. He is defined by his beloved car but also by his modern Western clothes although he is the normative, heterosexual, Muslim majority man.

The music of the series can be found online and includes songs sung in the club. However, I was fascinated by the songs of the Jewish community: two songs connected to religion, 'Alevanta Mordehay', a Purim song, celebrating deliverance of

Jews in the Achaemenid Persian Empire and 'Kuando el rey Nimrod', a song about Abraham; and two secular songs, a lullaby, 'Yo era ninya/I was a girl from a rich family', and a sorrowful love song, 'Adio Kerida/Farewell my beloved' (sung by Yasmin Levy).

Although the series is mostly in Turkish, there are dialogues in Greek, English and the language of the Turkish Jewish community, namely Ladino. This language, derived from Old Spanish mixed with the vocabulary of many other languages from Iberia as well as the vocabulary from Arabic, Hebrew, which spread mostly through the Ottoman Empire after the Edict of Expulsion (1492) that dispersed the Jewish population of Castile and Aragon who had not converted to Catholicism. It once was the lingua franca among coastal traders and is still spoken by Sephardic Jews in Israel as well

as other countries, but is revived for music today and one has only to listen to 'Adio Kerida' to know why.

This beautiful series seems part of the world of the Hindi film with its language, songs and melodrama. Of course, it's hardly surprising in Turkey where, as Ahmet Gürata has shown, Hindi films were enormously popular, *Awaara* (1951) alone being remade numerous times. ■



THE SERIES SHOWS THE TRAUMA OF INDIVIDUAL AND OF THE GROUP, FOCUSING ON MINORITIES AND DIASPORAS. THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES ARE SET, AS IN OTHER MELODRAMAS, AS LOVE STORIES OR FAMILY STORIES, WHERE JEWISH WOMEN FALL IN LOVE WITH MUSLIM MEN AND MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS ARE IN CONFLICT

and daughters are in conflict, mothers spoil their sons who adore their mothers.

Other characters may have sexualities which are despised or even illegal, and are rejected by their own families. The modern, glamorous world of the club allows them to appeal to audiences through mobilising their artistic talent, which turns into fame and fortune that



Dissidence **DOWN**

After its victories in the Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is seeing a mellowing of rebel leaders like Vasundhara Raje and Uma Bharti in state units. In Rajasthan, Raje's supporters are more vocal now about supporting the party. In Uttarakhand, any threats of a split or challenge to the state leadership has weakened. Even in Karnataka, former Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa's son, who was aggressively pushing for a ministry, now says he does not want any post.

How To Keep Him

MAYAWATI'S MAN FRIDAY Satish Chandra Mishra is the Brahmin face of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). His time in Rajya Sabha also comes to an end on July 4. The party has no numbers to send him back but if he gets nothing, it will upset whatever Brahmin base is left with BSP. He might be mollified by a major promotion within BSP. Mayawati can't afford to lose him. He is also the main link between her and BJP.

Selective Punishment

AFTER THEIR DEFEAT, Sonia Gandhi dismissed five state Congress presidents but within the party, there is discontent that she protected Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi even though they were leading the campaign everywhere. Priyanka had been instrumental in the appointment of Navjot Singh Sidhu as Punjab Congress president that was responsible for the debacle there. She was also behind making Ajay Kumar Lallu the chief of the Uttar Pradesh Congress. Rahul had a hand in making the presidents of the Goa and Uttarakhand units. And Priyanka was also directly looking after the UP election where they got just two out of the 399 seats contested. Party insiders are asking why they shouldn't be accountable.

Dark Horse

BJP HAD NOT announced a chief ministerial candidate for Uttarakhand before the election and there had been a lot of infighting over it. Now that it has won the state, the question looms large. One dark horse could be Anil Baluni, who is currently the national spokesperson of the party. Narendra Modi is said to be very impressed with him and they have worked with each other since Modi's Gujarat days.

REVOLT IN MOTION

A number of senior Congress leaders raised a revolt of sorts after the resounding defeat of the party in the state elections. Kapil Sibal, Sandeep Dixit, Sunil Jakhar and Harish Rawat were all unusually vocal about how the party was being run. Sibal even launched a direct attack on the Gandhis by saying that it was not a party of any single household and should be everyone's Congress. It is being said these dissident leaders might form a new political party before the 2024 General Election.



Corollary Benefit

AFTER THE RESULT of the five state Assembly elections, Congress leader Kamal Nath might see a rise in his fortunes. There is a vacancy for political advisor to Sonia Gandhi after the death of Ahmed Patel and he could be the much-needed foil. With many senior leaders once again protesting, he could be the bridge between them and the Gandhis. But while Sonia is said to be okay with the idea, Rahul Gandhi is averse to it.

PHONES OUTSIDE

FOR THE RECENT Congress Working Committee meeting, members had to keep their mobile phones outside the venue. It is a strict norm that the party has enforced. This was because information used to go to television channels and other media during the meetings. Also, there would be disturbance because members would be texting.

New Bloc

IN RAJYA SABHA, there is an attempt being made to form a non-Congress, non-BJP bloc with several leaders from Trinamool Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, Samajwadi Party, etc, working on coordinating their Parliament strategy. Even the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Telangana Rashtra Samithi and Shiv Sena are said to be secretly supporting this effort. If they can form such a bloc, then Congress could lose the main opposition leader's post in the Upper House.

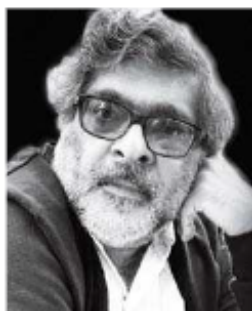
UPPER HOUSE POLITICS

THE ELECTION COMMISSION has announced elections to 13 Rajya Sabha seats, and after that seats will become vacant in June and July. Additionally, there are some nominated seats coming up for renewal for which the government has to send names. From BJP, the tenure of Roopa Ganguly and Subramanian Swamy also comes to an end. Both have been critics of the government and BJP will be in no mood to send them back. But for Swamy, a section of RSS is putting pressure to accommodate him. However, the party bosses are not very keen.



KARNATAKA DILEMMA

The Karnataka government's performance remains a problem for BJP and there are strong rumours that Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai might be asked to go. But the party does not want to bring back BS Yediyurappa. There is then National General Secretary BL Santhosh, an old RSS hand, who has become very powerful within the state organisation. He would not be averse to being chief minister but fitting him within the caste equations, an important factor in the state's elections, might be difficult. Also, whether Modi and Amit Shah would be interested in giving him the post is uncertain.



By VINAY LAL

TRUTH ON TRIAL

On March 18, 1922, Gandhi pleaded guilty and won a moral victory

IT WAS EARLY 1922 and India was in the thick of the non-cooperation (*asahayoga*) movement that Mahatma Gandhi, who had returned to India as the prodigal son after a long stint of two decades in South Africa, had launched in 1920. He was practically catapulted to the leadership of Congress in 1919 when, in a brilliant if simple and intuitive stroke of political judgement, he orchestrated a nationwide hartal. The disturbances that followed shook the country, nowhere more so than in Amritsar, where the assault of an Englishwoman first provoked the commanding officer to institute 'the crawling order' until a few days later it was followed by the wanton murder of nearly 400 unarmed Indians at Jallianwala Bagh. Shortly thereafter, Gandhi led the country in a mass movement of nonviolent non-cooperation which he framed as a *dharmayuddha* or righteous struggle. He promised Indians swaraj in one year—but only if they adhered rigorously to the principles of satyagraha.

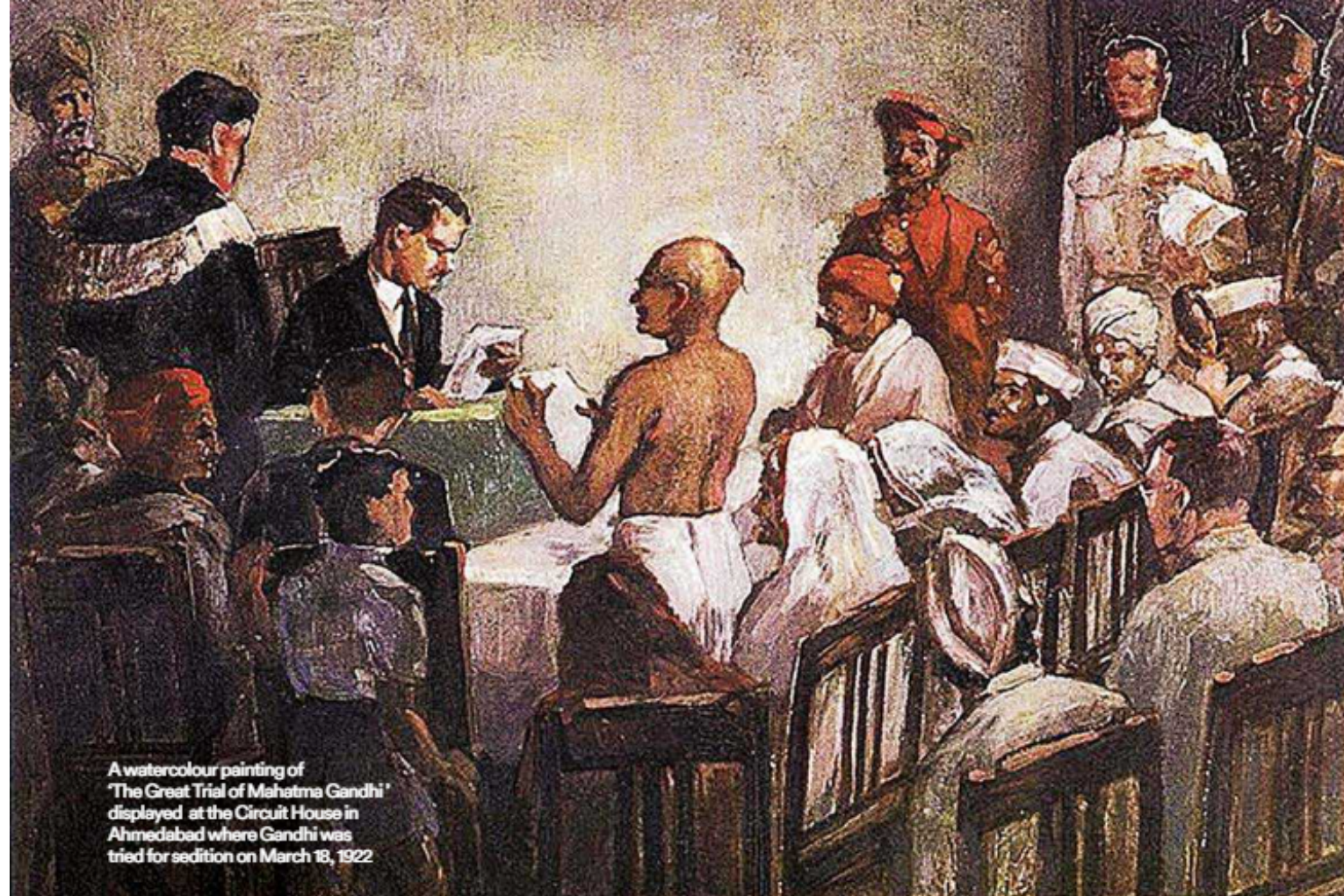
THE INCIDENT OF CHAURI CHAURA

An incident on February 4, 1922 at Chauri Chaura, a dusty market town in the vicinity of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, was to change altogether the narrative that had been scripted by Gandhi thus far. That day, a procession of Congress and Khilafat volunteers, feeling emboldened by their numbers and the appreciable political success of the non-cooperation movement, and similarly enraged by reports that some volunteers had been beaten up by the police, marched towards the local bazaar at Mundera and sought to effect a blockade. Warnings by the *thanedar* to retreat, followed by dummy rounds fired in the air, were met with jeers and taunts and, more tellingly, by the excited rejoinder that "by the grace of Gandhiji bullets had been turned into water". When bullets replaced blanks and pierced the flesh, blood poured forth: and there is nothing quite like blood to make people bloodthirsty and incite them to revenge. The large crowd pelted the policemen with stones; then chased them into the police station, the front door of which was then bolted from the outside. Fire was set to the thana; some policemen roasted to death, others were hacked to death: 23 in all died.

This was enough for Gandhi, the *de facto* generalissimo of Congress. He was inclined to the view that the 'mob' violence at Chauri Chaura was unimpeachable evidence of the fact that the country was not yet ready for swaraj. Some in Congress thought that Gandhi tended to be dictatorial, and the next step that he took confirmed their worst suspicion; though he did not occupy the presidency of Congress, he prevailed upon the Congress Working Committee to suspend the non-cooperation movement. The decision was met with a storm of criticism: some denounced his authoritarianism, others scoffed at his poor judgement, and all bemoaned the fact that India now seemed no closer to independence than it had been before the onset of non-cooperation. But characteristically Gandhi remained firm, issuing a poignant rejoinder in *Young India* on February 16: "Chauri Chaura is after all an aggravated symptom. I have never imagined that there has been no violence, mental or physical, in the places where [colonial] repression is going on." Those who could not read the signs were incapable of understanding that the gruesome violence at Chauri Chaura "shows the way India may go, if drastic precautions were not taken."

THE ARREST AND THE TRADITION OF THE POLITICAL TRIAL

If the country was aggrieved by the withdrawal of non-cooperation, the British were doubtless relieved. To some of the British, Gandhi was a rabble rouser and sedition-monger, albeit an unusual one—not without the reputation of a saint. He made them



A watercolour painting of 'The Great Trial of Mahatma Gandhi' displayed at the Circuit House in Ahmedabad where Gandhi was tried for sedition on March 18, 1922

ALAMY

THE AUDIENCE WOULD HAVE BEEN STUNNED; THE JUDGE MUST HAVE BEEN LEFT SPEECHLESS. WHAT KIND OF MADMAN WAS THIS WHO, HAVING CONCEDED HIS GUILT, THEN INVITED THE JUDGE TO EITHER INFLICT UPON HIM THE MAXIMUM PUNISHMENT PERMISSIBLE UNDER THE LAW OR TENDER HIS RESIGNATION? GANDHI'S WRITTEN STATEMENT WAS YET MORE POWERFUL; IT IS A CHARTER OF INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

uneasy: they found him moralistic, a prolix voice for virtue, but for a people who were themselves intensely moralistic this was akin to the pot calling the kettle black; and though they claimed to be Christians, they recognised that Gandhi was a much better Christian than they could ever hope to be. Moreover, "the cunning bania", as he was sometimes derided, especially by the non-official British in the country, had pronounced his loyalty to the British Empire within which he sought equal rights for Indians, and he seemed to have the capacity to mesmerise many Britons and Europeans who had sworn their allegiance to him and to the cause of Indian independence. The British reasoned that though Gandhi had lately become the leader of a movement for independence, he was still someone with whom they could dialogue.

Nevertheless, it had also become manifestly clear that a Gandhi behind bars was in every respect preferable to a Gandhi who was footloose and could galvanise the people into action. Since at least mid-1921, the British had been contemplating putting him under arrest, but British officials had been divided

on the wisdom of taking that step and even more so on the timing of his arrest. Archival material, most of it still unpublished, furnishes an extraordinary tale of the protracted exchange of correspondence over several months between the Government of India, the Bombay Government, and the Secretary of State for India in London. One school of thought adhered to the view that Gandhi exercised a restraining influence and that his dominance was such that it had helped to marginalise the revolutionaries who were prepared to use violence and engage in targeted assassinations of British officials. In this view, Gandhi was to be arrested only when his freedom could no longer be tolerated. Some officials found the call for his arrest a risky proposition for other reasons: it seemed that the Mahatma, going back to his days in South Africa, always emerged from prison rejuvenated.

The arguments for arresting Gandhi had never seemed more persuasive than when he suspended the non-cooperation movement throughout the country. His colleagues and associates in the highest echelons of the Congress leadership were

unhappy and the anger among the masses was palpable. His influence seemed to be waning and the time seemed opportune for arresting him and seeking his conviction. To some officials, the time had been ripe since at least mid-1921: as one senior official in the Home Department wrote on November 24, 1921, Gandhi and the Congress Working Committee had issued “as direct and forcible a challenge” as it was in their power to do so, and “it is highly questionable whether Government can afford to refuse to take up the challenge.” Gandhi had been preaching sedition, officials argued, and the failure to arrest him was having an adverse effect on the morale of government employees, besides eroding the credibility and prestige of the government.

THE POLITICAL TRIAL IN COLONIAL INDIA

It was under these circumstances, then, that the decision to arrest Gandhi was sanctioned with the expectation that he would be brought to trial. The political trial occupied a remarkable place in the arena of state activities in colonial India. Trials lend themselves to the theatrical, just as historians and moralists have derived pedagogic use from the trials of ‘great men’ (and occasionally women). State trials were never convened without the expectation that, in the dramatic setting of the courtroom, the performance of both the state and the rebels would be received with utmost attention; and though not all trials were accompanied by fanfare, by the loud trumpeting of the triumph of justice, they were each in their own way spectacles to which the nation stood witness. British rule in India was also characterised by the bold claim that the British had instituted, uniquely in the long history of Indian civilisation, a government that adhered to the ‘rule of law’. India, wrote the jurist, historian, and colonial official Henry James Sumner Maine, was singularly “empty of law” before the arrival of the British, and British officials were nearly unanimous in adhering to the view that colonial rule rested on no greater foundation than the promise of the state’s adherence to the ‘rule of law’ and the grant of ‘law and order’ to a people who previously had known only despotism.

Indian nationalists by the early 20th century had, however, succeeded in posing a wholly unanticipated problem for the colonial state: the British represented themselves as presiding over a government instituted under the law and were now bound to give political offenders the benefit of due process under the law, but the bulk of the nationalists had trained

as lawyers and some had shown themselves perfectly in command of the law and the protocols of the courtroom. When Tilak had been put on trial on charges of sedition in 1908, his mastery of English common law and juridical skills had embarrassed the prosecution and amply demonstrated that the trial was but a charade to trumpet the idea that the British were a nation characterised by the sense of justice and ‘fair play’. The risk of putting Gandhi on trial was all the greater for another reason: even as the non-cooperation movement had, the British claimed, introduced anarchy and disrespect for the law, Gandhi insisted that the idea of civil disobedience was predicated on a fundamental respect for the law even as it entailed the violation of specific laws that were clearly unjust.

THE TRIAL OF GANDHI, OR TRIAL OF THE STATE?

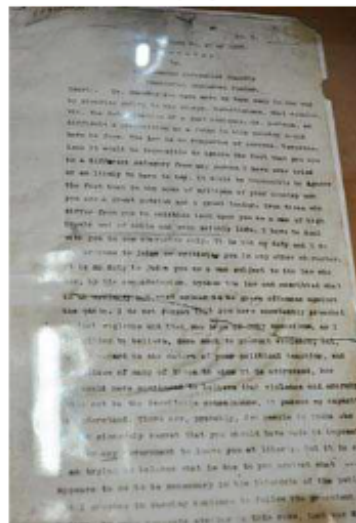
Before Gandhi could be brought to trial, he had to be charged with a particular offence. As the editor of *Young India*, a journal published by Shankarlal Banker, Gandhi had given the colonial state material galore with which they could charge him, to cite from the chargesheet, “of bringing or attempting to bring into

hatred or contempt or exciting or attempting to excite disaffection towards His Majesty’s Government [established] by law in British India”.

Three articles penned by Gandhi were deemed defiantly seditious, among them ‘A Puzzle and Its Solution’, published on December 15, where Gandhi wrote in an unmistakably strident tone that “we seek arrest because the so-called freedom is slavery. We are challenging the might of this Government because we consider its activity to be wholly evil. We want to overthrow the Government. We want to compel its submission to the people’s will.” In ‘Tampering with Loyalty’ (September 29, 1921), Gandhi had offered an intolerable provocation in enjoining Indian soldiers to renounce their allegiance to the British crown: it is “sinful for anyone, either as soldier or civilian,” he wrote, “to serve this Government which has proved treacherous to the Mussulmans of India and which has been guilty of the inhumanities of the Punjab”. Gandhi claimed God on his side, and so left a Christian power without its last line of defence.

On the afternoon of March 11, 1922, Gandhi and Banker were arraigned before the magistrate; when asked to list his profession, Gandhi wrote down: “weaver and farmer”. We do not know with what countenance the clerk received this information. One is tempted to say that

The first page of Justice Broomfield’s written judgment



**BROOMFIELD
SENTENCED GANDHI
TO SIX YEARS,
ADDING THAT NO
ONE WOULD BE MORE
PLEASED THAN HIM
IF THE GOVERNMENT
FOUND THE
OPPORTUNITY TO
REDUCE HIS SENTENCE**

as Gandhi had sown the seeds of sedition, he was perhaps within his rights in characterising himself as a farmer, but we do him the injustice of failing to recognise that at his ashrams Gandhi farmed vegetables. It is in yet a more profound sense that Gandhi could well call himself a farmer: he had a deeply ecological view of the world and his abhorrence of waste points to his impulse to husband resources. With his self ascription as a “weaver” one is similarly inclined to interpret this metaphorically, to suggest the intricate web of morality and politics that Gandhi spun around a beleaguered colonial regime. But that recognition should not obfuscate the fact that the icon of the spinning wheel was an inalienable part of Gandhi’s identity, the very soul of his life and a testament to his belief in the integrity of labour. A humble farmer and weaver, and only incidentally, it seems, the author of the doctrine of satyagraha, the philosophy of nonviolent resistance, was now pitted against the might of an empire.

One week later, at noon on March 18, Gandhi was wheeled into the Circuit House at Shahi Bagh. The courtroom was full: in attendance were some of Gandhi’s closest associates in Ahmedabad and at Sabarmati Ashram, as well as Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. Everyone “rose”, Naidu wrote, “in an act of spontaneous homage when Mahatma Gandhi entered” the courtroom. CN Broomfield, ICS, the District and Sessions Judge, presided: his engagement diary scarcely hints at the world-historical event that would unfold before him, recording only the following:

*Golf before breakfast
Try Gandhi.*

The prosecution was conducted by the Advocate General for the Bombay Presidency, Sir Thomas Strangman; the accused were, by their own choice, undefended. The charges were read out; when asked how they pleaded, both replied: “Guilty”. There is sometimes no keener way of contesting than refusing to contest; besides, nationalist rebels are not known to proclaim their guilt, and perhaps Gandhi had already succeeded in disarming his persecutors.

Since the defendants had pleaded guilty, the need for a lengthy trial had been obviated and Broomfield proposed to pass sentence. Strangman objected, briefly describing the circumstances that had led the government to believe that Gandhi was a seditionist who should have known that, whatever his own commitment to nonviolence, his actions and pronouncements had instigated others to violence. The

The room where Gandhi was tried at the Circuit House in Ahmedabad



THE JUXTAPOSITION OF LAW WITH EXPLOITATION, OF SOPHISTRY WITH EVIDENCE, AND OF JUGGLERY WITH THE NAKED EYE—ALL THIS SUGGESTS A MASTERFUL COMMAND OF RHETORIC, THE IDIOMS OF ENGLISH, AND PHILOSOPHICAL REASONING, AND A PIERCING AWARENESS OF THE COURTROOM AS A PERFORMATIVE SPACE. AND YET, THE INDICTMENT IS EQUALLY CHARACTERISED BY THE SHEER SIMPLICITY OF THE PROSE AND THE FORCE OF DIRECT SPEECH

charges were serious enough that the public had a right to have a full understanding of the case. The majesty of the law seemed somewhat diminished if the prosecution could not indulge in a theatrical demonstration of power. The judge, however, was equally within his rights to accept their plea, and he proceeded to do so but not without offering the accused an opportunity “to make a statement on the question of sentence”. Gandhi had brought a written statement with him, but before reading it he stated that the advocate general had been “entirely fair” to him and had erred only in that preaching disaffection towards the existing system of government had become a passion with him “much earlier than the period stated by the advocate general.” He knew, Gandhi told the court, that he was “playing with fire”, but he would have failed in his *duty*—a word that resonates insistently throughout the proceedings, ironically questioning the modern and highly overwrought discourse of ‘rights’—if he had not inspired his people to refuse “to submit to a system which I considered had done an irreparable harm to my country”. He took responsibility for the violence—including the diabolic crime of Chauri Chaura—that had taken place and announced himself as prepared to accept “the highest penalty

Volunteers for the non-cooperation movement



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that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime, and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.” “The only course open to you the judge, is,” Gandhi concluded his extempore presentation, “as I am going to say in my statement, either to resign your post or inflict on me the severest penalty if you believe that the system and law you are assisting to administer are good for the people.”

The audience would have been stunned; the judge must have been left speechless. What kind of madman was this who, having conceded his guilt, then invited the judge to either inflict upon him the maximum punishment permissible under the law or tender his resignation? Gandhi had already invited many Englishmen and women to become moral traitors to their own race, and many had accepted; and now he seemed to be prepared to advance moral treason as the sine qua non of virtuous conduct among those charged with disbursing justice throughout the Empire. The written statement that followed was yet more powerful; indeed, in its devastating indictment of British rule, it is a charter of Indian independence, a pivotal even founding document in the global history of anti colonial resistance, and a masterwork of political prose and moral reasoning. Gandhi describes how, from being a loyal subject of the British Empire, he was transformed into a seditionist, convinced that the British connection had rendered India helpless, incapable of resisting aggression, and unable to provide for its people. “Little do they realize,” Gandhi says of well-intentioned British officials, “that the Government established by law in British India is carried on for the exploitation of the masses. No sophistry, no jugglery in figures, can explain away the evidence that the skeletons in many villages present to the naked eye.” His emphasis on the British rhetoric of “fair play”; the juxtaposition of law with exploitation, and similarly of sophistry with evidence, and of jugglery with the naked eye—all this suggests a masterful command of rhetoric, the idioms of English, and philosophical reasoning, and a piercing awareness of the courtroom as a performative space. And yet, the indictment is

GANDHI WAS INCLINED TO THE VIEW THAT THE ‘MOB’ VIOLENCE AT CHAURI CHAURA WAS UNIMPEACHABLE EVIDENCE THAT THE COUNTRY WAS NOT YET READY FOR SWARAJ. SOME IN CONGRESS THOUGHT THAT HE TENDED TO BE DICTATORIAL, AND THE NEXT STEP THAT HE TOOK CONFIRMED THEIR WORST SUSPICION; HE PREVAILED UPON THE CONGRESS WORKING COMMITTEE TO SUSPEND THE NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT

equally characterised by the sheer simplicity of the prose and the force of direct speech, as evidenced by this sparkling line: “Affection cannot be manufactured or regulated by law.” The law can criminalise hate speech, but it cannot make you love others.

Gandhi had said that he did not expect “conversion” on the part of the judge, but Broomfield was clearly moved—and more. “The law is no respecter of persons”, he stated, but he could not ignore the fact that Gandhi was “in a different category from any person” that he had ever tried or was likely to try. He could not ignore the fact that “in the eyes of millions” Gandhi was viewed as a great patriot, a great leader, indeed as “a man of high ideals and of noble and of even saintly life.” Nevertheless, as a judge, he had but one duty to perform, to judge Gandhi “as a man subject to the law” who by his own admission had violated the law. Broomfield proceeded to sentence Gandhi to six years of simple imprisonment, adding that no one would be more pleased than him if the government found in the course of events in India the opportunity to reduce his sentence. The proceedings had been marked by extraordinary civility, and the judge was applauded even as, in the words of Sarojini Naidu, “the emotion of the people burst in a storm of sorrow as a long, slow procession moved towards him [the Mahatma] in a mournful pilgrimage of farewell”. The crowd milled around Gandhi; some sobbed and fell at his feet. The reporter for *The Bombay Chronicle*—an English-owned newspaper firmly allied to the nationalist cause—felt that the trial of the “Greatest Man of the World” brought to mind a “moving scene recalling the sentence of Socrates, ‘cool and smiling’ to the last moment amidst his pupils.” Spectators at the trial could have been forgiven for thinking that the state itself had been on trial. ■

Vinay Lal is Professor of History and Asian American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of several books on politics and culture

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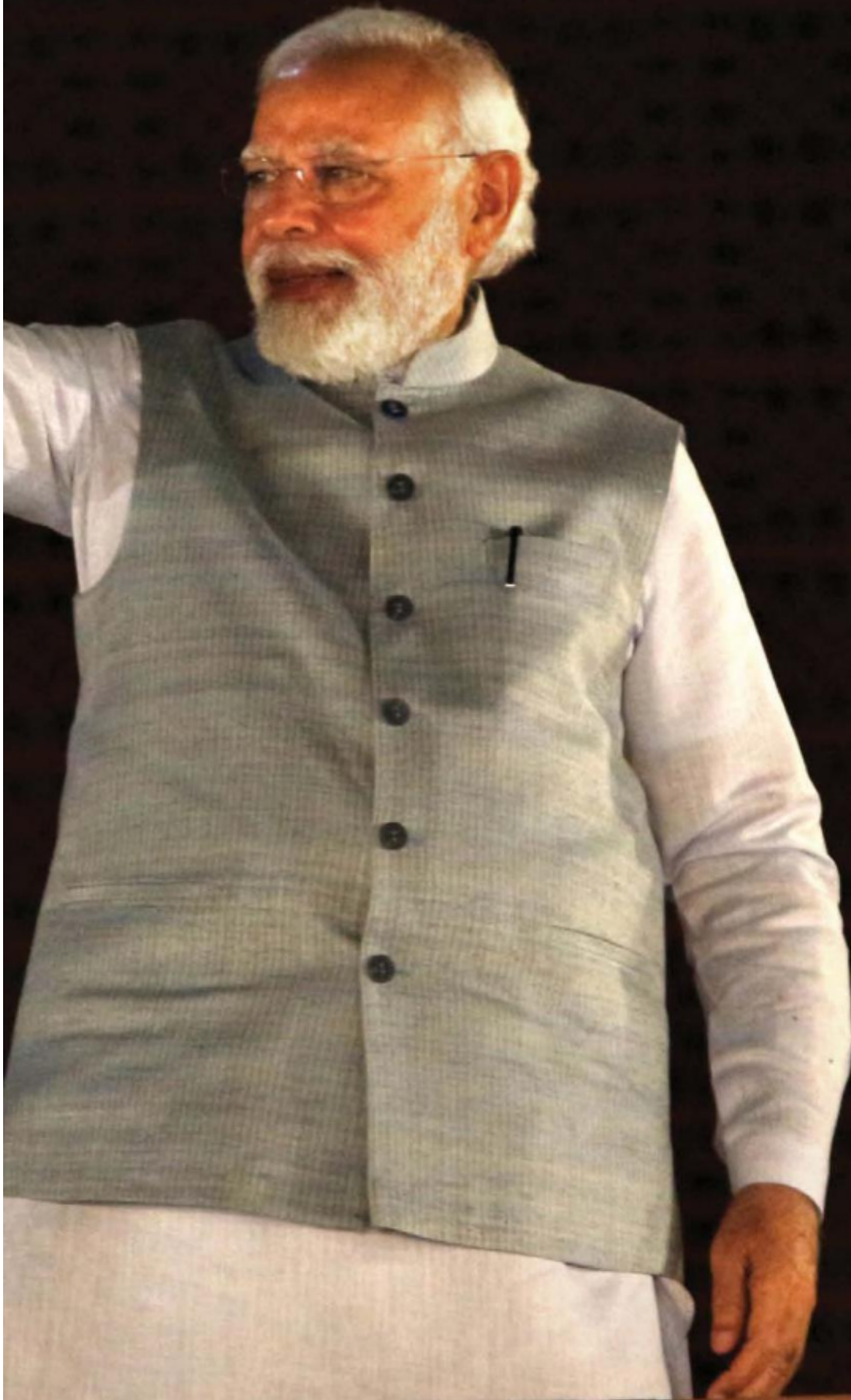
COVER STORY



THE MIND OF THE PERMANENT WINNER

Why **Narendra Modi** is
the mothers' choice

By MJ AKBAR



PRIME MINISTER
NARENDRA MODI AT THE
BJP HEADQUARTERS IN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 10, 2022

Photo GETTY IMAGES



week, as everyone has heard, can be a long time in politics. A year, conversely, might be a very short time in politics. Witness the sensational change in the landscape during the 12 months between Bengal 2021 and Uttar Pradesh 2022.

Drama is the lifeblood of Indian democracy's thriving theatre. Every General Election sets the stage for the next play. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune appeared in sudden profusion just as he was getting into stride after the handsome mandate of 2019.

A second term in office is always more difficult than the first, for while the mandate has doubled, expectations have quadrupled. Prime Minister Modi is no stranger to this syndrome, having served three terms as chief minister of Gujarat. But nothing in his past could have prepared him for the challenges that descended upon India, and indeed the world, literally out of thin air. Covid was on no one's horizon.

Covid was an economic crisis wrapped in medical dread, generating horrific memories, visceral images, and existential fears. With bodies floating along the Ganges, poor health infrastructure and a regional administration which sometimes seemed in denial about lost employment, Uttar Pradesh (UP) became electorally vulnerable. On the other hand, Modi reinforced his credibility as guardian of the poor in this calamity through a free-food programme for the impoverished in a time of existential need. Indian women are the biggest consumers of welfare and development, for they assume responsibility for the home kitchen. An Indian mother will always be the last person to eat in a marginal-income family. For these mothers, Covid sustenance was manna from Modi. They stood by the prime minister when he asked for their vote in a UP election that was closer than raw numbers might suggest. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victories in four states were a resounding endorsement of the prime minister's commitment and leadership.

Mamata Banerjee finessed this Modi asset in the 2021 Bengal Assembly elections by positioning herself as a woman first, and chief minister later. This was the visual and literal message on her hoardings. In hoardings and speeches, she became the younger sister to older women and elder sibling to the young. She has always identified herself with the poor and once again used that psychological link successfully. This persona remains her singular advantage over competitors in the great game of finding a face to project as an alternative prime minister in the next General Election. Her advocates have not yet made this argument in the national discourse, possibly because they have not thought of it.

In a strange, almost inexplicable phenomenon, opposition parties that are very successful in states seem to lose the plot when they aspire for the Centre. Their thinking has,

historically, subsisted on thin arithmetic. This was as true when Congress seemed invulnerable as it is now when Narendra Modi has become the dominant fact of Indian politics.

The error is elementary. They have programmed themselves into believing that they lose a General Election because they do not unite against the ruling establishment. This is, at best, a very limited factor. They flounder not because of political disunity, but because of economic incoherence. A simple reference to common sense would confirm that an alliance must be held together by an economic policy beyond the promise of rewards for a partisan core base. Parties within an alliance can then prove the efficacy of their programme by implementing it in the states that they rule. Prime Minister Modi won the trust of voters across the map because he had made development synonymous with his image in Gujarat. Voters were confident in 2014 that the Gujarat Model would be replicated across the country.

A government has the advantage of being defined by what it does; an opposition is recognised by what it promises to do. It is a misconception to believe that the second is easier than the

first. The promise must be credible.

Mamata Banerjee, energised by victory in 2021, spent the next 12 months touring the country in spasms in a bid to expand her presence and bolster her bid for Delhi. She thought she could conquer the old Portuguese colony of Goa from the birthplace of the British Raj by sending subordinates who could speak English. You cannot stitch a persuasive narrative from yarn. Mamata Banerjee might have been better served if she had invited potential allies to a Calcutta Conclave to hammer out a common economic and social policy framework. Politics alone is not adequate for political success.

This is universally true of democracies, whose elections are driven by aspiration. The most formidable example, to my mind, was that of a then young American Democrat Bill Clinton, who pulled off an amazing upset in the elections of 1992 against the seasoned Republican George Bush (the Elder), leading by nearly 20 per cent in the opinion polls at the start of the campaign. Clinton paraded a single sentence: "It's the economy, stupid!" Economic welfare was and remains the principal

THERE IS NO ATTEMPT AT SERIOUS INTROSPECTION, LET ALONE ACCOUNTABILITY. ON THE BARREN FIELDS OF INTELLECTUAL INERTIA, THE TRIUMVIRATE OF SONIA GANDHI, PRIYANKA GANDHI AND RAHUL GANDHI CONTINUES TO BELIEVE THAT ALL CONGRESS NEEDS TO DO IS COME UP FOR AIR AT ELECTION TIME



GETTY IMAGES

vote-fetcher. It's ideas, ideas, ideas; not politics, politics, politics.

The only virtue left in the Indian National Congress is consistency: it gets weaker in every election. Each post-mortem is a tired search for alibis to protect the presiding fading dynasty. The party has lost the ability to demand or strategise change. This is hugely ironic, because Indira Gandhi, the fountainhead of the present dispensation, first invented and then reinvented herself in 1969 and 1978 to resurrect a sinking contraption. And so Sonia Gandhi flicks away questions about the traumatic loss of Punjab by the counterfactual explanation that the problem lay not in removing a perfectly estimable chief minister, Amarinder Singh, but in not sacking him earlier. All adjacent heads nod sagely in obedient agreement.

Rahul Gandhi mentions "youth" and there are cheers all around, as if youth is a doctrine rather than the young being a beneficiary of governance. Amarinder Singh's analysis was

sharp: Congress had blundered and "dug its own grave in the border state the day it decided to back an unstable Navjot Singh Sidhu as state chief and a corrupt Charanjit Singh Channi as chief minister months before the polls...Congress has lost not only in Punjab but also in UP, Uttarakhand, Goa, and Manipur; and the Gandhis are entirely to blame for the party's shameful defeat. People have lost faith in their leadership". These are self-evident truths. But Amarinder Singh is now an outsider in an environment which is desolate both inside and outside.

There is no attempt at serious introspection, let alone accountability. On the barren fields of intellectual inertia, the triumvirate of Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi continues to believe that all Congress needs to do is come up for air at election time, and the voter will sing hosannas. Those who disagree, like the presumed group known as 'G23', sulk in the privacy of their homes or take whatever little satisfaction is available through elliptical tweets.

Everyone seems trapped in the coma induced by a dynasty

WOMEN SUPPORTERS AT A BJP RALLY IN BAGPAT DISTRICT IN UTTAR PRADESH, FEBRUARY 22, 2022



INDIAN WOMEN ARE THE BIGGEST CONSUMERS OF WELFARE AND DEVELOPMENT. FOR THEM, COVID SUSTENANCE WAS MANNA FROM MODI. THEY STOOD BY THE PRIME MINISTER WHEN HE ASKED FOR THEIR VOTE IN AN UTTAR PRADESH ELECTION THAT WAS CLOSER THAN RAW NUMBERS MIGHT SUGGEST

THE MOST DIFFICULT CHALLENGE BEFORE PRIME MINISTER MODI AFTER HIS PERSONAL TRIUMPH IN THE ASSEMBLY POLLS IS THE REAL TIME HE HAS LEFT BEFORE 2024. HE WILL NEED RADICAL IDEAS FOR QUICK ECONOMIC REVIVAL, DRIVEN BY THE PRIVATE SECTOR, THE ONE ENGINE WHICH CAN DELIVER QUICKLY IN THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

that has lost its *raison d'être* but refuses to recognise reality. Rahul Gandhi is not an alternative to Narendra Modi for the people of India, except in the fancies of his coterie. The only effective sound you hear from the Congress office is that of doors being slammed after the exit of yet another leader. Even a CM Ibrahim in Karnataka has had enough. Those who took a similar decision earlier, from Assam's Himanta Biswa Sarma to Madhya Pradesh's (MP) Jyotiraditya Scindia, have found another niche.

Unbelievably inept decisions by Rahul Gandhi handed Congress space in Punjab to Arvind Kejriwal. Kejriwal's strategy is uncomplicated: displace Congress to replace BJP. He is a lone ranger in the style of Vishwanath Pratap Singh, confident that success begets success. This may be true, but the question is of pace. It has taken seven years for Kejriwal to add Punjab to Delhi; how long will he have to wait for a third bastion? A circumference of 18 Lok Sabha seats is not sufficient as a launchpad for the prime minister's job. VP Singh started with UP and much of Bihar as his operational base.

Real time can exist on a separate dimension from the calendar. The most difficult challenge before Prime Minister Modi after his personal triumph in the Assembly polls is the real time he has left before 2024. On paper, there are two years to go before the next General Election. Once you start measuring the time left for actual governance, the calendar shrinks. Campaigning for the 2023-24 electoral season will begin after Deepavali 2023, since winter polls in Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh precede the General Election in the summer of 2024.

Counting from April, this leaves about 20 months in which to mend the tatters caused by two upheavals.

If Covid could not be foreseen, neither could Ukraine. The economic shock of the former has merged with the economic disruption of the latter to hit Indians where it matters most, in employment and prices. The rising price of fuel might stabilise with agreement on a new status quo on Ukraine, but the new normal will be significantly higher than oil prices in the first week of December 2021. The consumer cannot be protected from this escalation, nor can the government increase taxes on oil to finance emergency expenditure like free food. The economic recovery from Covid

was never going to be easy; Ukraine has made it more difficult. We are only now beginning to see a worldwide rise in foodgrain prices, while Russia's decision to stop the export of crucial elements like palladium and titanium in response to Western sanctions will affect the costs of a range of consumer products from computers to cars. Inflation is creeping towards double digits in America and Britain, a problem they have not witnessed in more than four decades.

The warning signs are all over the place in our country: on Friday, March 11, Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), said in Washington that while India had been good at managing its finances, the post-Ukraine rise in oil prices would have a negative impact on its economy. Simultaneously, in Mumbai, the deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Michael Patra, pointed out that the growth story had become as weak as it was in 2013 even as "recent geopolitical developments" posed an "upside risk". From Delhi, on the same day, data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) indicated that industrial growth remained "sluggish" at 1.3 per cent. As I write this, India's consumer behemoths have announced an average 5 per cent rise in prices of daily-use commodities like milk, tea and the new favourite of the upwardly mobile—noodles. Companies blamed this on inflation in costs. Inflation breeds further inflation.

Prime Minister Modi knows that he will need to take some tough decisions. He now has the political strength to do so. He will need radical ideas for quick economic revival, driven by the private

sector, the one engine which can deliver quickly in the right conditions. Incentives do not have to be merely financial. Indeed, they should be conceptual. Here is a layman's suggestion: Can 20 large private corporations be contracted to build 10,000 inexpensive model residences each within 12 to 16 months in the 20 poorest districts at a pre-fixed price, with a reasonable tax-free profit of perhaps 3 or 4 per cent? This would supplement government construction for the homeless at private sector pace. Time, as mentioned, is at a premium. If any government puts an idea on paper today it takes at least six months before the project can break ground.

If the past year disappeared in a flash, the next year will be even shorter. ■



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BATTLE PLAN 2024

From governance to delivery of welfare and attention to women voters, BJP will offer a new deal

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

A day after election results to five state Assemblies saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) return to office in four, including a morale-boosting win in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Gujarat on a visit that was at once a victorious homecoming and also the start of a new campaign, this time to defend his home state due for polls later this year. The moment was not casual and signalled the prime minister's determination to solidify BJP's dominance of its fortresses like Gujarat and expand its influence on less familiar terrain ahead of 2024 when he will seek an unprecedented third

term in office. His visit came a day after he told party cadre at the BJP headquarters in Delhi that UP has shown the way, debunking insulting references to caste four times in a row beginning with the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. He was clearly buoyed by the results that saw BJP getting 49 per cent votes even in the first phase of the UP elections in the 'Jat belt' that was supposed to be the staging ground for the Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal (SP-RLD) challenge to BJP, a caste putsch that failed to materialise.

In 2017, BJP survived a scare in Gujarat, winning by a slender majority of seven seats, its total of 99 one short of 100 in a 182-member House. Congress notched up 77 seats and while it did not pull off an upset, it did better than anticipated. BJP's vote



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**PRIME MINISTER
NARENDRA MODI ON
A ROADSHOW
IN AHMEDABAD,
MARCH 11, 2022**

share of 49.1 per cent was an increase over 2012, but the party faced the makings of a perfect storm: Gujarat minus Modi as chief minister, trader anger over implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), a revolt by a section of Patidars over quotas and allegations of being pro-big business. BJP won its sixth consecutive victory, providing the party an opportunity to recoup. Keen to extend its hold and remain a step ahead of the competition, BJP changed the entire cabinet, including then Chief Minister Vijay Rupani, in September last year, bringing in a raft of new faces. So far, BJP managers believe the radical move is working and Modi's recent visit serves to underline that he will supervise the campaign for all practical purposes, looking to ensure

a strong result. The prime minister will be at the forefront of BJP's campaigns ahead of the next Lok Sabha polls in Rajasthan, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and four Northeast states, with the just-concluded state elections conclusively establishing his paramountcy in the electoral field where he towers over contenders. At a time when governments across the world are facing harsh questions over issues like the handling of Covid and economic hardships, BJP is receiving renewed endorsements. Global opinion trackers like Pew and the Edelman Trust Barometer show that trust in institutions, including government, remains high in India. The 'secret sauce' might well be a grounded approach to policies and governance

that Modi spoke about when he called on experts and commentators to abandon “old records (of the gramophone type)” and see the changes sweeping the country. In contrast to the controversies and even public resistance surrounding the Covid vaccination programmes in several nations, India has covered a substantial 81.5 crore of an eligible 94 crore adult population with a double dose. Right from the start, when the government ignored calls for widespread testing at a time when laboratories and test kits were in short supply, choosing to concentrate on people arriving from abroad, crucial calls have worked. As was the case, government officials point out, in designing economic packages that avoided outright loan waivers and instead offered working capital support. Modi amplified the theme when he said his policies are grounded and evidence-based, reflecting the needs of the people.

While BJP's success in UP, where it won 273 seats in a House of 403, has grabbed the headlines, its victory in Uttarakhand is worth close attention given that the party faced serious anti-incumbency having shuffled three chief ministers. The resounding win is due in good measure to Modi's strenuous campaign in the closing stages of the polls. He spoke for more than an hour at Almora on February 11, promising to make good shortcomings and warning that the alternative in the form of Congress was worse, representing a return to the bad old ways of family raj and corruption. The choice of Pushkar Singh Dhami helped and even though he lost his seat, the chief minister presented a youthful and energetic face and one with a popular connect.

Punjab represented a tough task given that BJP had for long been second fiddle to the Akalis, but even there, Modi's efforts to portray sympathy and understanding for Sikh traditions were intended to heal the wounds created by the farm agitation as much as to boost BJP's prospects.

In a detailed speech on the evening of March 10, even as counting for the Assembly elections wound down, Modi set out his political vision for the party and government. The lack of emotive issues like Ram Mandir had been noted by commentators during the UP campaign and such references remained absent in his remarks as he addressed the party cadre. Rather, his focus was on the need to improve and expand transparent delivery of welfare and governance benefits to the poor. He pointedly underscored that the task was not easy, drawing on his experience as Gujarat chief minister, to say the ‘last mile’ remained a hurdle in reaching the underprivileged. “But I am not one who will sit quietly until benefits reach the doorstep of the poor,” he said. It was an extraordinary pledge, one that meant a sharpening of an approach to governance that BJP feels delivered the winning punch in UP. Under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the state government maintained a relentless intensity in delivering a range of welfare and financial benefits as part of state and Central schemes that range from free rations, housing, water connections, scholarships, old age pensions to assistance to small businesses. It was because of these efforts, BJP leaders

believe, that the ravages of two years of Covid and complaints about unemployment did not cause the sort of discontent that would allow Mandal parties and caste identities to stage a return to the centrestage as was the case since the early 1990s until 2014. According to people familiar with the prime minister's considerations, the principle of *antyyodaya*, or the last man in the line, will be the centrepiece of governance that also seeks to ‘unify’ beneficiaries rather than divide them along caste lines. It is not that Modi is unaware of caste realities and their relation to deprivation, particularly in the case of backward classes and Dalits (apart from tribals). But the model he emphasises differs in that he looks to counter caste-based outfits like SP and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) through an alternative ‘empowerment’ formulation that provides backwards and Dalits space in the Hindutva tent. This requires a dialling down of upper-caste identity even as these sections remain key supporters of BJP. Balancing the appletart is challenging, and Modi would have been only too aware during the campaign that the Hindutva-plus development revolution cannot be seen as permanent. Now that he has led BJP to a gratifying victory, the prime minister is clearly looking to press his advantage and shut out rivals before the next election.

Does that mean cultural battles or ‘polarising’ debates are a thing of the past? The difference may lie in emphasis rather than any blanket avoidance. Days after the election results, Modi met the makers of the film *The Kashmir Files* and praised their efforts at placing before the public a narrative that was suppressed and said that an entire “ecosystem” had been rattled. It is interesting to note how often the prime minister has referred to the ‘ecosystem’ that he says represents the intellectual underpinnings of Congress. In an interview during the campaign, he had said Congress was not likely to change as its ecosystem would not allow it. Over the years, he has used the phrase to take potshots at the main opposition party internalising a fringe anti-BJP worldview, mainly scripted by the party's ideological critics, without pausing to consider that the formulation lacks popular traction. The ideological and political ‘war’ with the Left establishment will continue; indeed it acts as a catalyst in charging up the party cadre, but the message crafted for the broader mass of voters is likely to have other focal points. Apart from the elaboration of a pro-poor mandate, Modi has been uninhibited in his attack on “*parivarwad* (dynastic politics)” and his call on “*gyanis* (knowledgeable ones)” to consider the ill effects of dynasty in politics is a strong political mantra other than being another dig at the ‘ecosystem’ that chooses to ignore inconvenient questions in its quest to prop up a challenger to BJP.

This then will be another major pillar for the ruling alliance's political strategy that draws on the rising turbulence in Congress post-polls to argue that successive defeats have failed to instil any accountability in the party. Modi took care to drive home the point at a meeting of the BJP Parliamentary Party that efforts to secure tickets for kith and kin are not welcome. Arguing that dynasty is co-identified with self-interest, the prime minister looks to target the main opposition and several regional parties as “anti-development”, a theme that worked in the states that

MODI HAS VIGOROUSLY ADVOCATED AN 'INDIA FIRST' APPROACH AND ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT. THIS CAN BE EXPECTED TO BE A DOMINANT THEME IN THE REMAINDER OF HIS TERM AND WILL BE COMPLEMENTED BY REFORMS INTENDED TO PROMOTE A STARTUP CULTURE

recently went to polls. The track gains credence with an evocative recollection of scams and scandals that dogged previous Congress governments in Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur. To add to the mix, BJP counters the charge that it is 'communalising' elections by pointing to the 'appeasement' politics of rivals that looks to fuel insecurities among minorities and represents inherently divisive caste appeals.

Modi has also staunchly defended anti-corruption actions, including cases filed against political figures in the opposition. He has linked the backlash from affected political parties to the ills of dynastic politics, saying that the two are sides of the same coin. He frequently brings up the point in his public speeches, asking whether action against the corrupt be stalled and saying that there is a conspiracy to taint investigative agencies. His likely reference is to actions such as those of the Maharashtra government which has filed cases against police and Enforcement Directorate officials. These are seen as a response to investigations against leading figures in the ruling coalition in Mumbai. The upshot, say well-placed sources, is that the action of anti-corruption agencies will proceed and may well gain pace. There are several pending investigations that include cases relating to the Congress leadership and the political point that BJP seeks to derive is that it has, in contrast to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), ensured corruption in high places does not become a defining feature of the government. The prime minister's credibility on this count remains high and is also to be seen in the perception about leaders like Adityanath. The belief that the chief minister is engaged in sincere efforts to improve the common lot rather than feathering his own nest helped offset possible anti-incumbency due to woes related to uneven development. The perceived track record of the alternative SP and BSP regimes on this count might have strengthened the drift towards BJP. As at the Centre, the state government was able to successfully claim it has used technology such as Aadhaar-linked direct benefit transfer (DBT) and reforms in recruitment to government services to dramatically improve transparency in governance and its efficacy. The constant reference to impartial administration of law and order by Modi did offer obvious contrasts to policing under the SP government. The reference to riots during SP's tenure and concerns over the safety of "daughters and sisters" was a clear pointer to allegations about a sectarian and communal bias in policing. The charge found takers due to the experience—attested to by voters

in media interviews—of the power enjoyed by political mafias.

The election results have helped sharpen BJP's attention to the importance of women's votes that the prime minister said helped cement the party's victories. "I bow to the women of our country. Their contribution to our success has been huge," he said. Alongside women, he thanked young voters after the elections. The presence of women and youth at BJP rallies was a standout feature and their vote was key to the party overcoming the odds in states like Uttarakhand. The Centre has stepped up its planning for programmes such as POSHAN that aims to boost nutrition for children, pregnant women and lactating mothers. The sub-optimal results of the national family health surveys with regard to nutrition have been taken note of and the government is likely to double down on this score in the months ahead. The successes of schemes like Ujjwala and Mission Indradhanush (immunisation) are building blocks for a larger outreach to women. The various initiatives have helped build trust in BJP's ability to deliver say party leaders who point out that voters have been ready to give the party another chance even on issues like employment, seen as a work-in-progress, based on the assessment that things are improving and that the party offers better prospects than its rivals. Women are a very important part of BJP's plans as it stresses its commitment to providing a safe and secure environment and participation in the economy.

There are risks, as is always the case, in any scenario. The war in Ukraine, if it carries on well into the year, can generate serious pressures on the economy, Modi has indicated, pointing to India's dependence on both Ukraine and Russia for various supplies, including defence components, and on the rise in commodity prices. The situation on the Line of Actual Control with China could deteriorate. Or the Covid pandemic might resurge just when it appeared that the worst was over. All these situations constitute a real and worrisome challenge that can extract a political toll on any government. But the prime minister has vigorously advocated an "India First" approach and Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) which incorporate a Made in India emphasis. This can be expected to be a dominant theme in the remainder of Modi's term and will be complemented by reforms intended to promote a startup culture. Big policy initiatives take time to show their impact, all the more with states being essential partners, but Modi and BJP will hope there is enough happening on the ground to convince voters the country is moving in the right direction and that a shared imagination about the future becomes a binding covenant. ■



THE GRAND DELUSION

The bad news is not likely to end soon for Congress.
But facing its biggest existential threat, the party
leadership continues to be in a state of denial

By ULLEKH NP



SONIA AND RAHUL GANDHI
AT THE CONGRESS
WORKING COMMITTEE
MEETING IN NEW DELHI,
MARCH 13, 2022

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he central theme of Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* is denial of reality by its main characters, mother Amanda Wingfield, daughter Laura and son Tom. Williams also puts the spotlight on what critics have often called the "impossibility of escape and the trap of memory" for this family, who lost their social status after bad luck assailed their fortunes. Sans the other attributes of these famous fictional characters, the first family of Congress, comprising Sonia Gandhi and her son and daughter, Rahul and Priyanka, seems detached from reality as its perfunctory responses to the recent, disastrous poll results suggest, and continues to live in the memory of a long gone past.

Unsurprisingly, calls for an overhaul of leadership has resurfaced in the Grand Old Party with the 'Group of 23' (G23) dissidents, many of them veteran Congress leaders who have served their prime under multiple premiers from the same family, insisting that the family take responsibility for the humiliating

drubbing in the five state elections—in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur. While a section of family loyalists is busy haranguing colleagues who have raised the banner of revolt to mend the party back to its winning ways, the decimation of Congress at the hustings, especially in UP where Priyanka Gandhi campaigned in 200-plus election shows, is too monstrous to be swept under the carpet. The meeting of the so-called G23 at the residence of former Cabinet minister and Congress stalwart Ghulam Nabi Azad has reiterated the need for a massive organisational makeover. A statement from the group said, "We believe that the only way forward is for the Congress to adopt the model of collective and inclusive leadership and decision-making at all levels... In order to oppose the BJP it is necessary to strengthen the Congress Party. We demand the Congress Party initiate dialogue with other like-minded forces to create a platform to pave the way for credible alternatives for 2024." The letter was signed by 18 Congress veterans, including Azad, Manish Tewari, Kapil Sibal, Shashi Tharoor, Shankersinh Vaghela, Sandeep Dixit, Vivek

Tankha, Raj Babbar, et al.

Before the meeting began, the likes of Congress veteran Mallikarjun Kharge had charged them with attempting to break the party even after the Congress Working Committee (CWC) had discussed all issues related to the poll debacle. The 'discussion' that Kharge was referring to followed the dramatic—as though stage managed—offer of the trio, Sonia, Priyanka and Rahul, to step down from leadership positions in Congress, a proposition that the loyalist-dominated CWC rejected outright.

This time, however, the intensity of defeat is so stunning that posturings that would have worked earlier didn't look sufficient to either calm tempers or hold the flock together. In UP, the party's tally went from bad to worse compared with 2017 when it fought in alliance with the Samajwadi Party (SP). The number of seats fell from seven to two as Congress' vote share declined to 2.33 per cent. In Uttarakhand, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had expected anti-incumbency trends due to local issues, Congress vastly trailed expectations. In Manipur, where it had won 28 seats five years ago, it won only five this time, posting a close to 19 per cent decline in vote share. In Goa, too, BJP bucked anti-incumbency as Congress slid further into a resounding electoral humiliation. Its vote share fell almost 5 per cent as it lost six seats compared with the last time to win a mere 11 seats. In Punjab, its tally fell from 77 to 18.

The contention of senior Congress leaders such as Kapil Sibal and others is that Congress has been shrinking so rapidly since 2014 that there has to be a change of leadership. Sibal, for his part, said in an interview to *The Indian Express* that in eight years as many as 177 MPs and MLAs and 222 candidates had left Congress, insisting that no other party had suffered such an "exodus" in India at any point of time.

G23, therefore, wanted a non-Gandhi at the helm of affairs or a collective leadership mechanism in place, with the family having failed to steer the party in its most critical phase since 1885. At the CWC meeting, Azad had apparently criticised the leadership—without naming Rahul Gandhi who had been calling the shots in the party without any official position since he stepped down as president in August 2019, some months after the last Lok Sabha defeat—for not being accessible. But his feeble protests sank amid the cries of endorsement of the Gandhis' leadership by the majority in the CWC loaded with yes-men. The 'rebels' had met earlier on March 10, the day the results came out.

Abandonment is a recurring theme in Tennessee Williams' plays—for him it means more than mere neglect, rather a rejection of reality. The reaction of the current Congress leadership to crises at hand suggests as much: in a seemingly cosmetic gesture on March 16, ahead of the rebel meeting, the party leadership picked featherweights Rajani Patil, Jairam Ramesh, Ajay Maken, Jitendra Singh and Avinash Pandey to assess the situation in the five states where the polls were held. A day earlier, on March 15, Sonia Gandhi had asked state unit presidents in all the five states to resign. Party insiders call such steps inadequate and too late.

Academic Sumantra Bose, who has closely studied the rise and

fall of the first family of Congress, argues that the trio will continue to cling to power. He notes, "The sad remnant of the Grand Old Party is being held captive by the family, which is presiding over its final demise. The family will not relinquish control, as the latest tiresome, staged episode of pseudo-emotional drama and blackmail in the CWC meeting demonstrates." Bose, a professor at the London School of Economics, adds, "The Congress can still survive, and perhaps even partially rebuild, but only if it can escape the family's shackles. That can happen only if its experienced and sensible leaders formally split the party and lay claim to the Congress mantle, leaving an irrelevant rump around the dynasty." But he is of the view that "they seem to lack both the courage and the cohesion to take this step".

Congress is in such a state that even the family needs protection compared with a decade or so ago when the fiat of the so-called high command was treated as gold dust by all Congress leaders, senior and junior alike. All that stems from the lack of resources at their disposal to accommodate a vast majority of party functionaries from across socio-economic groups at various posts—all of which have become too scarce with the party being reduced to two states, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. In the latter, the party is beset with internecine wrangling now expected to get worse.

The bad news will not end there. There are strong indications of a flood of woes for Congress that has ruled India for the most number of years. It will most likely lose its position as the main opposition party in Rajya Sabha once new members come in by July. Thanks to its massive slide in Assembly polls, it is impossible for the party to retain the numbers in the Upper House. In the absence of organisational polls, Rahul Gandhi has remained the de facto leader and he has been running it through phone calls whenever he has been in the country and leaving things to chance in a laid-back manner, in sharp contrast with the laser-like precision of BJP's election campaigns led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and assisted by others.

Again, for Priyanka Gandhi, whose rise to general secretary of the party with special charge of UP has been phenomenal, the role has proved to be as bad, if not worse, compared with her brother's. The duo, with the help of the mother, took a series of decisions that led to the further slump of the party, notwithstanding their refusal to be held accountable for poor planning and priorities.

Points out Bose: "Rahul Gandhi fails to click because he is devoid of any leadership abilities and political skills. But the decisive revelation of the UP and Punjab results is that his sister, while superficially more presentable in public, is equally useless. Priyanka Vadra's meddling contributed in no small measure to the Congress debacle in Punjab. As for UP, her 200-odd rallies and roadshows, more than those of any other campaigner, including Yogi Adityanath and Akhilesh Yadav, resulted in Congress sinking to 2 per cent of the popular vote." He adds, "By contrast, even the effectively non-contesting Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) polled six times Congress' vote. Priyanka's catastrophic failure shows that without grassroots presence and support, strategies devised in New Delhi—such as 40 per cent tickets to women candidates,

an otherwise progressive step—are of no use. The result shows that her high-voltage campaign was nothing more than a series of empty photo ops, and the crowds most probably mobilised by the money remaining in the dynasty's coffers."

Just as illusion versus reality is the favourite theme for Tennessee Williams whose characters struggle with both, the first family of Congress, too, goes to the extent of indirectly blaming the electorate for their setbacks, as evident from most elections since 2014. It is no wonder that the people Rahul Gandhi surrounds himself with—in a marked departure from the style of Sonia Gandhi in her prime when she allowed free rein to leaders with institutional memory and networking skills, such as the late Ahmed Patel and others—are often reality-weary pundits

KAPIL SIBAL AND GHULAM NABI AZAD



GETTY IMAGES

and academics with no understanding of the nuances of Indian politics. YouTube videos of conversations between Rahul and Cornell economist Kaushik Basu are some examples. The Gandhi scion had in the meantime distanced himself from seasoned leaders to infest a world full of novices. It will therefore come as no surprise if the party is hurtling towards an implosion in its emaciated form even as it loses its social base to other parties it had tied up with in earlier elections. To make matters worse, a raft of legal troubles also awaits the family.

Congress has always been an umbrella organisation that historically accommodated varied interest groups, faiths and communities besides ideologies. The party for long had allowed the convergence of such groups in order to thrive. Under Rahul Gandhi's leadership, it however veered at a fast clip towards the fringe Left, obsessed with identity politics of particular groups. Constant dalliance with such entities meant that Congress began to lose the war of perception in the face of a resurgent BJP that left nothing to chance and captured the imagination of a large majority of people who felt left out of the cultural discourse in

universities and elsewhere. This coincided with Congress under Rahul veering more and more towards the fringe forces he found his liking for. This was an expensive mistake for any politician to make, especially when the ground beneath the party's feet had already begun slipping. His failure to fashion a credible narrative stood out as he expended tremendous energy in backing the causes raised by peripheral outfits on campuses and elsewhere. His campaign themes found no takers as exemplified by his widely advertised 'discussions' with Kaushik Basu. All such exercises ended up advertising the inadequacies of the 51-year-old Congress leader, rather than elevating him to the status of a serious politician.

The cul-de-sac political existence of Congress was further compounded by the entitled scion leaving out experienced hands from decision-making. Congress insiders say the anointment of political newcomers in the north Indian scheme of things—for instance, that of AICC General Secretary KC Venugopal—boomeranged, much to the distress of other senior central and regional leaders. Amarinder Singh, former Punjab chief minister and former Congress heavyweight, once struggled to recollect Venugopal's name. "It was not Singh's fault, but when you appoint political lightweights to responsible positions, such incidents are par for the course in politics," says a Congress leader close to the matter, who adds that the sister-brother duo was also insecure and suspicious of the presence of seniors in key positions in the party. "Even those who were close associates of their father, the late Rajiv Gandhi," he adds.

Another leader recalls that Congress' fall from grace had started a long time ago thanks to public appeasement of communities, leading to resentment among others who could easily be then mobilised against Congress. He credits the return of the Ram Mandir movement to the "Shah Bano case in which the Rajiv Gandhi government went for crass appeasement of the Muslim clergy against a woman in deep distress through an act of law to overturn a fair judicial verdict". Arrogance and detachment from reality are the reasons some others cite for the decline and fall of Congress. In his heyday, Rajiv Gandhi used to poke fun at BJP leaders of the time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, saying, "*Hum do, hamare do*", borrowing from the population control slogan of the time.

Today, with BJP scaling new heights and Congress getting reduced to pitiable numbers in Parliament as well as in the states, the family that has considered it a birthright to rule India is at the portals of grave danger, personally as well as politically, as the weight of the past comes back at it with vehemence. Leaving the party is sure to expose the Gandhis to more trouble. Like Tennessee Williams' brooding characters, they have to pretend that their illusion of indispensability is real. ■

KASHMIR ON THE NATIONAL MIND

**A FILM BECOMES A CATHARTIC CULTURAL
EVENT THAT BRINGS THE TRAGEDY OF
THE PANDITS TO THE PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS**

By **KAVEREE BAMZAI**

ARVIND MUNSHI WAS all of 16, having just cleared his Class 10 examination, when he was woken up one night, February 10, 1990, at 3AM, and bundled into the family Maruti 800. His father was at the wheel, his octogenarian grandmother, his mother, and his sibling crammed into the small car along with him. The house they were leaving behind in Chanpora was constructed a mere three months ago. The family had just moved into it, from their quarters in Srinagar's Lal Ded Hospital, where both his parents were doctors.

In that one moment, when his father turned on the ignition, everything changed. The family stayed in Jammu for two years, 10 to a room, before Munshi left for an engineering college in Mangalore, his dream of studying medicine shattered forever. He has done well for himself, now a senior executive with Paytm Bank, but he often thinks of the Valley he left behind, the stories not told, the childhood lost, and the relationships ruptured.

He has written and read about it often, watched some movies based on his beloved Valley as well, but he has always felt rejected and gaslighted by the Republic of the Stonehearted. Until he saw *The Kashmir Files*, which caught his attention with the very first scene in which a young boy playing cricket mentions Sachin Tendulkar's name and is beaten up for it. "It was me, playing as a 16-year-old in my home, with boys I thought were my friends," he says.

He is one of the many Kashmiri Pandits who have finally seen their stories told on screen with the respect and integrity they deserve. For so long erased from the discourse on Kashmir, left to fend for themselves or allowed to live subhuman lives in camps where they fell to sunstrokes and snake bites, Vivek Agnihotri's

film, now running in theatres nationwide, has created a cultural moment, a point of no return, an instant when the pain of an invisible community has been seen, heard and felt. Theatre goers, some Kashmiri Pandits, others not, are at one with the horrors visited upon them, from the young lab assistant Girija Tickoo's brutal murder in 1990 to the Nadimarg massacre of 24 Kashmiri Pandits, including a young boy, in 2003.

There is still no consensus on the numbers of Kashmiri Pandits who were killed, or even of those who were forced to abandon their homes, but there is a new certainty to call the "exodus" what it was: a genocide, where one community was virtually erased from the geography of its own homeland. Dr Ramesh Raina, president, All India Kashmiri Samaj, says, "when the political class of the country lets you down on flimsy grounds, it has always been art which has kept such issues alive. The Holocaust has been told and retold by films such as *Schindler's List*. *The Kashmir Files* may not belong to that class of cinema, but it brings to light the terrible injustice done to our beleaguered community."

Enough work has been done by many Kashmiri Pandit organisations since 1990 to highlight the horrors. There have been searing accounts of the exodus in movies such as Onir's *I Am* (2010), memoirs by writers Siddhartha Gigoo and Rahul Pandita, and appearances on TV debates by activists such as Sushil Pandit and Rashneek Kher. But with the establishment putting its muscle behind *The Kashmir Files*, with no less than Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying the entire ecosystem is trying to continue suppressing the truth of what happened to Kashmiri Pandits, it has become a flashpoint for the Pandits. Do they seize this moment to return to the Valley, will it have space for them, and indeed, do they even want to go back? Or do they forgive, but not forget?



Anupam Kher as Pushkar Nath Pandit
in *The Kashmir Files*

And what is it that will help them remember? Actor and activist Ashwath Bhatt says the exploitation of their pain has to stop, and the investigation of what went wrong must begin. "The government needs to establish a commission with proper representation to record the testimonies of victims and uncover the reasons for their exodus." No government, he points out, has had the audacity to publish a white paper in the last 32 years and place it in Parliament. Rehabilitation is a distant dream, he believes.

What makes the film different from the rest on the same subject? Perhaps it has come at a time when the political narrative of

the film is aligned with that of the establishment. The enemies are clear—the Muslim, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) academic, and the media—so much so that its critics have called it propaganda rather than a political film. The terrorists are not seen as mere Pakistani-trained operatives but as young men who went berserk with the gun in their hand, targeting many prominent Kashmiri Pandits. Farooq Bhatta, in particular, the main terrorist in the film, is a cross between JKLF's Yasin Malik and Bitta Karate, who confessed in a TV interview that he had killed 20 Kashmiri Pandits. The academic, represented by the figure of Radhika



"THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO ESTABLISH A COMMISSION WITH PROPER REPRESENTATION TO RECORD THE TESTIMONIES OF VICTIMS AND UNCOVER THE REASONS FOR THEIR EXODUS"

ASHWATH BHATT actor and activist



"HOW CAN YOU GET INTO THIS ONE-UPMANSHIP OF SUFFERING, OF WHO HAS THE HIGHER BODY COUNT? WHAT WILL WE ACHIEVE BY HANGING YASIN MALIK AFTER THREE DECADES? SHABBIR SHAH WENT TO THE CAMPS IN JAMMU, APPEALING TO THE PANDITS TO RETURN. MIRWAIZ UMAR FAROOQ CAN BE USED PRODUCTIVELY TO MAKE THE SAME APPEAL TO THE PANDITS, BUT HOW MANY WANT TO GO BACK?"

AS DULAT former chief of RAW



"I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT KASHMIRI PANDITS. JUST LIKE THE AUDIENCE, I TOO WAS CONFUSED AND UNAWARE. I ONLY REALISED IT WHEN I WAS SHOWN THE VIDEO TESTIMONY OF THE FIRST-GENERATION VICTIMS. I WAS TOTALLY TAKEN ABACK AND THAT'S WHEN I THOUGHT THE TRUTH SHOULD BE BROUGHT FORWARD"

DARSHAN KUMAR actor

Menon, is clearly an amalgam of Nivedita Menon of JNU and the Booker Prize-winning novelist Arundhati Roy. And the media is shown as doing what it is told to by those armed with guns.

Management consultant Bharat Wakhlu believes the movie has placed the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits front and centre of the idea of India. "It's been done in a way that our community can no longer be pushed aside, especially when it comes to dealing with the future of the Kashmir region." He believes Kashmiri Pandits can definitely return to their homeland, not necessarily as "employees" with government jobs but on their own terms, and add value to the lives of the people of Jammu and Kashmir as entrepreneurs, artists, philosophers, peace activists, teachers, investors, politicians, doctors, builders, consultants and hoteliers. "They will connect Kashmir to the globe, and bring the great gifts of our ancient homeland, for the benefit of the world," he says.

Many Kashmiri Pandits are torn between gratitude at the much delayed recognition of their suffering and going back in time to re-examine the damage to their soul. As the singer Aabha Hanjura posted on Instagram recently, she may not agree with the politics of the makers of the film, but is she to pretend that nothing happened? "I was a kid when I saw a cousin who was not even 16 die of snakebite in her sleep, in a refugee camp in Jammu; people in my family, who were rich businessmen, turned paupers overnight; so many elderly in the community have dementia, depression and are battling serious mental health issues even today." As a young mother, she says she gave birth to another refugee in her own country, and she doesn't want a world for her where her story is brushed under the carpet.

THAT IS THE heart of the conundrum. The Kashmiri Pandits used education as a means of upward mobility, studying and working hard wherever they went, whether it was in engineering colleges in Maharashtra where Bal Thackeray gave them reservations, or later in Delhi University colleges where they got concession in cut-offs. As Bhatt says: "We killed no one or advocated violence. We just wanted justice and someone to believe us. We don't want rightwing goons to hijack this film for personal gains."

Some of that is inevitable, and that worries those who want reconciliation, if not return. Says former RAW chief AS Dulat: "How can you get into this one-upmanship of suffering, of who has the higher body count? What will we achieve by hanging Yasin Malik after three decades? Shabbir Shah went to the camps in Jammu, appealing to the Pandits to return. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq can be used productively to make the same appeal to the Pandits, but how many want to go back?"

Perhaps the better question is what is left for them to go back to. Their homes have either been razed to the ground or offloaded in distress sales. A new generation has come into being that remembers nothing of its syncretic past. Since the abrogation of Article 370, an estimated 500 Kashmiris have been rehabilitated, adding to the 350 families who never left. More will not go unless their sense of fear is not dispelled and trust with their Muslim neighbours is not rebuilt. Farah

Bashir, who wrote movingly of her trauma of living under the gun, of the Army and the terrorist, in her memoir *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*, says: "It's an unfortunate event of displacement from a period in our contemporary history which shouldn't be weaponised, but has to be looked at with empathy. It scarred ordinary people who lived through that era, as you'd remember from my book, about how my grandmother missed her favourite neighbour Laxmisree, and I could never locate my friend Renuka." Revisiting such memories is nerve-wracking, she points out, adding: "Sometimes, we want to wish our pain and loss away but unfortunately, we can't, and have to sit and deal with it." She talks of the battlefield that Kashmir continues to be. Last week, her 79-year-old father barely escaped a shootout while he was out to get his routine blood tests done. Bashir was shivering the whole day and flew down the following day as it brought back the traumatic years of growing up and always hoping for his safe return.

A divided land, broken relationships, the othering of two communities who once lived in separate but equally harmonious worlds. That is the reality of Kashmir now. For the Pandits, it may well be a promised land they cannot return to, but what *The Kashmir Files* has done has made their pain palpable to the rest of the country. Darshan Kumar, who played the young Kashmiri Pandit who has no clue of his heritage, was numbed when he did the research for his role. He had sleepless nights at times in preparing to show the pain on camera. "I didn't know much about Kashmiri Pandits," he says, adding that he is ashamed of himself because of that. "Just like the audience, I too was confused and unaware. I only realised it when I was shown the video testimony of the first generation victims. I was totally taken aback and that's when I thought the truth should be brought forward," he says.

He is shown as a young man who leaves the Valley after his mother, based on Girija Tickoo, is murdered along with his brother. He lives in Delhi with his grandfather, Pushkar Nath Pandit, a man reduced by the tragedy to become like the Shakespearean clown who speaks the truth that no one wants to listen to. Played by Anupam Kher, he is a truth teller who discomfits everyone, because he is a reminder of everything they want to turn away from. He speaks of Kashmir's rich heritage, carries around him a garland of photographs of the Pandits who were killed, and demands the abrogation of Article 370. The tragedy is that he is a composite of so many ghosts who walked, men who lost their dignity with their livelihoods, and women who gritted their teeth to raise their children in the face of the greatest odds.

The spirit of the Kashmiri Pandits is perhaps best expressed through a *vakh* (poem) by Lal Ded, the 14th century mystic poet.



Vivek AgniHOTRI's film, now running in theatres nationwide, has created a cultural moment, a point of no return, an instant when the pain of an invisible community has been seen, heard and felt

It goes like this:

'Lyakh to thokh petha sheri hetsum/Nyanda sapnem path brontha taani/Lal chhas kal zanh nu thsenim/Ada yeli sapnis weype kyaah? (Their abuse and spit I wore like a crown/Slander dogged my every step/But I am Lal, I stayed unmoved/Full I am, where's room for more?)'

For three decades, the Pandits have worn crowns of spit and abuse. They have famously taken to the pen, not the gun. They have focused on building their lives outside the state. They have grown weary of being effaced from the Kashmir story, either equated with the Nehru-Gandhis locked in a special relationship with the Abdullahs or portrayed in fiction as Boonyi Kaul, the Pandit girl who betrays her Muslim lover, Shalimar, in the twisted love affair at the heart of Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel, *Shalimar the Clown*. Perhaps they need to follow Rushdie's advice, who said when questioned about his experience with the fatwa: "I remember telling myself not to carry the hatred around, although I know where it is. I have it in a trunk in storage."

In excavating the buried remains of our lives and telling our own story, that's where we Kashmiri Pandits need to keep our fear and loathing. In imaginary trunks in the forgotten attics of our long-lost homes. ■

OPEN conversation

with **MARCI SHORE**

historian

By RAHUL PANDITA

‘I Don’t Think Putin
Think We Are in



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

Will Stop at Ukraine, I Don't a Rational Actor Paradigm'

The war in Ukraine has intensified in the last few days. There have been dozens of airstrikes, resulting in thousands of deaths. Hundreds of thousands of people are under siege, with Russia blocking food and water supplies. There are estimates that at least three million people have been forced to leave Ukraine while millions have been internally displaced.

Ever since the war began, Marci Shore, who teaches European intellectual history at Yale University, has barely slept. The phones are constantly ringing, and she has made appearances on television and other media to talk about what she calls Russian President Vladimir Putin's unhinged aggression. In between, she speaks to her friends in Ukraine, for whom she says she worries constantly.

Shore's most recent book, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (2017) is a deeply felt account of the 2013-14 Ukrainian revolution which, she says, unified Ukrainians in a manner that is getting reflected now in the resistance they are offering to the invading Russian army. Here, Shore talks about Ukrainian defence, young Russian soldiers and their motivation, the role of Western powers, and Putin's unfinished business.

I know it's a very busy time for you. But, for us in India, can you describe what you are feeling about the war in Ukraine?

It's been devastating. And I feel ridiculous saying that because I'm on the other side of the world. I'm in a place that's relatively safe, at least as safe as America ever is. It feels like the world that existed a month ago no longer exists, that there's no continuity. Since the invasion began, I've been trying to shake myself out of the disbelief. And then I've just been following news reports in different languages and checking on my friends to make sure they're still alive, and talking to journalists, and talking to students. And thinking this must be a nightmare, that you're going to wake up and it's going to be over. I think moments like this force even people like me... I'm a scholar, I'm a historian of the 20th century, I know what kind of evil is possible in the world. And even so, the moral shock is still there, like the sheer possibility of so much evil.

I studied these things, I'm familiar with them, I know what's possible. I knew there was a possibility that Putin would invade. But I also look at how I've gotten so many letters and emails from readers, from students, from colleagues, from distant acquaintances,

from people I'd forgotten I ever met—people asking how they can help people getting on planes and going to Poland and working with refugees...people who had nothing to do with Ukraine sending money to these humanitarian efforts. I think there are millions and millions of good people in the world. There are all these millions of people trying to help and so how is it possible that a handful of psychopaths can wreak so much evil? It's just not right. The world shouldn't be like that.

Give us a sense of what is happening in Ukraine right now. How are people in Ukraine suffering under the Russian siege?

The Russians have been bombing civilians. They are trying to bomb the country into submission. They are bombing maternity hospitals. They are bombing bread factories, and apartment buildings in residential neighbourhoods. They are shelling people who are on humanitarian evacuation routes. This is a thing that Svyatoslav Vakarchuk [Ukrainian social activist and a prominent musician] said to me three days into the war. He sent me this text message and said you don't know how happy I am when I see how Ukrainians are responding like that, the

spirit and the solidarity and the dignity, and the bravery and the cooperation like this was the Ukraine he had dreamt about. This was the Ukraine so many of my friends who are of my generation wanted to come into being and to develop on the ashes of the Soviet Union. And there is a sense that they are there. My friend wrote from Lviv, and he said the solidarity is indescribable; you've never experienced something like this.

People have been saying that the spirit of the Maidan [Uprising] that we feared was a brief moment is there, and it's back, and civil society is doing everything. But not only is the civil society doing everything... I mean, eight years ago, only civil society was doing everything. Eight years ago, it turned out that Ukraine didn't really have an army and it was exclusively being crowdfunded on the internet when the war in Donbas started. Now, it turns out, there's a functioning state. I mean, in fact, a state that is functioning remarkably well, and there's a functioning army. In addition, you have this civil society that stepped up. So, there's tremendous resistance, there's tremendous cooperation. You're dealing with somebody who is unhinged, and just doesn't care how many people he kills. And in that sense, it's an unequal battle. It's not just a question of somebody having more weapons, and somebody having fewer weapons, the West delivering weapons and that it will even it out. Because you're dealing with somebody for whom other people's lives have no meaning whatsoever, and therefore, anything is possible. Therefore, there's no restraint.

Does Putin look like a man in control to you?

To me, no. And I know this is a debate, whether or not Putin can be understood as a rational actor. And, of course, I have no especially privileged, epistemological access to what is going on inside his head. But I can tell you this that I listened very carefully, eight years ago, to Putin's Crimea speech, after the illegal annexation of Crimea. It was a very grandiose speech, it was very carefully choreographed. It was all false, but it was done with a certain rationality of cleverness. He was the grand strategist, he was very shrewd. He was manipulative in a very, almost kind of, scientific way.

When I listened to him three weeks ago, now, when he gave that hour-long speech before the invasion started, my intuition—and you can take this with a grain of salt, because I'm not a native Russian speaker—was that he was no longer the same person, that he was unwell, that he was much more unhinged, that his contact with reality, it had gotten much vaguer. My intuition was that we're no longer in the paradigm of a high-stakes chess game. We're now in the paradigm of Shakespearean drama. And an ageing man facing his own mortality has decided to create immortality

by destroying the world. That was my intuition, again, based on no privileged information, but that was my intuition.

I wanted to ask you about the symbolism of some terms that Putin has used in his justification of the war, especially when he said he was invading Ukraine for the de-Nazification of Ukraine. You and Tim [Marci's husband and Holocaust historian Timothy Snyder] try to warn about the perils of not learning lessons from the Holocaust. What do you feel when Putin puts such words to use?

This was actually a conversation between me and Tim. My first impulse when he [Putin] started with this rhetoric—maybe, six months ago or nine months ago, he had written this kind of crazy article about Ukraine and Russia and one people and setting out his own kind of view of history—was that this is just not worth engaging with. It's not worth dignifying with a response. And Tim's impulse was that, no, it's actually important that we respond. It's important that we respond as historians, that it's important that we set the narrative right. So, of course, de-Nazification... I mean, Nazi became like this word with immediate visceral resonance. It hits people at the level of effect that we must save people, let's de-Nazify... the embodiment of evil. It obviously makes no sense in present-day Ukraine. Putin was using this story during the Maidan, that the uprising was a kind of Western-sponsored Nazi conspiracy, and Ukrainian fascists were going to kill all the native Russian speakers in Ukraine. That story got him some traction with the West during the Maidan, the fear that maybe, it's a revolution by extreme nationalists and we should not support them. It got him traction at the beginning of the war in Donbas; there were many people in Donbas, maybe, say, a third of them, who thought, oh, maybe there are Nazis coming to kill us. Maybe, they do want to kill the Russian speakers, maybe, we do need to be protected.

Maybe, I should just add as a footnote for your readers, and you should be in a much better position to understand this than Americans because you're a multilingual country: Ukraine is a bilingual country. I mean, you could say it's also a multilingual country and a lot of people also speak Polish and now English and German, but it's a bilingual country—Russian and Ukrainian. In general, as you go east, Russian is more dominant and as you go west, Ukrainian is more dominant. But that obscures the fact that basically everybody can switch back and forth.

Now that story seems even more insane, because, at this point there is a democratically elected president, Volodymyr Zelensky, who is openly Jewish and it's not a secret that his family died in the Holocaust. And he's

You're dealing with somebody who is unhinged, and just doesn't care how many people he kills. And in that sense, it's an unequal battle. You're dealing with somebody for whom other people's lives have no meaning whatsoever, and therefore, anything is possible

a native Russian speaker. He does speak Ukrainian. And he, you know, has been speaking Ukrainian. Now all the time, especially, when he gave an address to Russians in Russian right before the invasion started, his Russian is better than his Ukrainian. And he was elected with 73 per cent of the votes. So, the idea that he is running a Nazi dictatorship is so absurd that it's not even clear how it makes any sense to engage with.

I should also add, for the record, I don't think that story has got the traction at all that it got eight years ago. Eight years ago, a lot of us who work on Ukraine, were very frustrated. We felt like we needed to intervene with the English and German-language media. People were like, well, there has been a history of Ukrainian nationalism, and maybe, there are extremist elements. That story now I think has zero traction, basically, anywhere except Russia. Then the big question is the Russians who support the war, what do they actually believe they're supporting. They're supporting, for the most part, something they believe is a so-called special operation just designed to liberate and rescue their poor, oppressed, Russian-speaking Ukrainian brothers and sisters, who have been victimised and persecuted by this "Nazi dictatorship".

We see some of the young Russian soldiers who get caught and then they speak to the local media, and then someone who's present there with a mobile phone camera. And this young man who's barely out of his teens says that he had absolutely no idea about the fact that he was being sent to Ukraine for this war. It's sad, isn't it?

It's wrenching. Ukrainians and Russians did not hate each other but now they will. I mean, now Putin has provoked the very situation that he claimed he was rectifying. There had never been resistance against Russia in Ukraine—at least nothing that I had ever encountered before Putin provoked a war there. Now, these young soldiers are coming in. I mean, okay, we say there 200,000 people there, there are some select group of sadists who exist in every culture. But that's not most people. I don't believe that Russia is a country of 144 million people who, just for reasons of pure sadism, want nothing more than to go out and massacre Ukrainians. I mean, that's what is so horrific about these 18-19 year-old kids. I don't think they even know what they're doing and how have they ended up there. You can ask what has happened to Ukrainian society, that they're doing such an extraordinary job resisting. This is a society that has matured tremendously; this, for me, is very much the legacy of the revolution. But really understanding what's happening and how it happened is not about understanding Ukraine. It's about understanding Russia. The fact that people don't want to be invaded, raped, pillaged,

bombed, they don't want their cities decimated, they don't want their people mass murdered, that doesn't actually require explanation. You don't actually have to think, oh, wow, how do we understand their reaction?

What requires explanation is what has happened in Russia, or what has not happened in Russia since 1991, that Putin has been allowed to get this hold over the population. He has been allowed to send these 18-19-year-old kids to kill people having no idea what they're doing, or why, or thinking they're in some other story.

My intuition was that we're no longer in the paradigm of a high stakes chess game. We're now in the paradigm of Shakespearean drama. And an ageing man facing his own mortality has decided to create immortality by destroying the world

It has also dented this powerful image of Russia as a military power because, at least speaking from an Indian perspective, there are many people in India who believed when the war broke out that, in front of a superpower like Russia, Ukraine would not last long. But now, it's already been three weeks. And the kind of resistance which the Ukrainians have put up is phenomenal. I was looking at the images of Zelensky roaming around in the streets and making these videos. It's quite fascinating, isn't it?

There is a kind of unanimity which is perhaps unprecedented in Ukrainian history. Eight years ago, there was re-

ally a sense that the East could be divided. You know, that there were going to be a lot of people in Donbas who would believe the story about the Ukrainian Nazis coming to kill them, who would welcome the separatists. It was unclear which way Kharkiv would go, Odessa would go. Now, there's an incredible amount of unity, nobody wants to be invaded by Russia. I think it's not about whether your Russian is better or your Ukrainian is better. It's not about whether your parents, ethnically, belong to this group or that group or are of Jewish origin. Nobody wants to be invaded by Russia. It's a different society, it's a different political culture. They have worked a lot on this democracy, it's not perfect. There have been all sorts of bumps, they're struggling with corruption, but they have developed an extraordinary civil society, which was the miracle of the Maidan. They are coming together to say, no, this isn't what we want.

I don't understand how militaries work well enough. But I know that even my Ukrainian friends and colleagues who are the least violent and the last people in the world to ever pick up a gun, will resist to the very end.

And it's not clear to me that the Russian troops are that motivated. If they're motivated, they're motivated by a reason that is false and it seems to me sooner or later, people must start to take in that reality that this is not the story we're told. If they were told that you're going to be graded as a liberator, and now they're hearing these people who are the age of their grandmother, who

grew up in the Soviet Union, who are speaking their own language saying, “go away, we don’t want you here” — that has to, at some point, penetrate.

And in this case, I do think the language is important. I have a friend who is going through cancer treatment, and she was in the hospital having chemotherapy the day the invasion started, and she was listening to Zelensky’s address. Her Russian is very good. She was listening to Zelensky address the Russian people in Russian hours before this invasion started, in which he said, “Please don’t do this, we don’t want to fight with you...this isn’t what we want, these aren’t the relations we want to have...we’re not your enemies, please don’t do this...if you come attack us, we will defend ourselves, you won’t see our backs, you will see our faces, we will look you in the eye.” It was one of the best addresses I’d ever seen. And my friend actually came right from the hospital, having just listened to this speech, into my kitchen and said you have to listen to this. And that was a speech that only a native Russian speaker could give to Russia. There was an intimacy about it and in some ways these are soldiers who are getting to a place where they’re talking to people who are speaking their own language. And I have to think that has to somehow play some role in giving us a better chance for some kind of that understanding to penetrate.

Are the Western powers doing enough? Is the US, at the other end of the spectrum in the Cold War, doing enough?

I’m probably also very unqualified to say because I’m also emotionally involved. So for me, I feel, of course not. We have to stop it, somebody has to stop this. I understand that the major consideration is you don’t want to provoke a nuclear war. And then the question becomes, if you intervene sooner, is that more likely to provoke than if you intervene later? And what we know from history is that we’re in the world of radical contingency, it could be that whatever we do. Putin is determined to push that button, and write history with himself as the great ender of history. In either case, he would push the button. We don’t know, we’re kind of guessing at this point. My sense is that the Ukrainians are fighting for all of us. I don’t think Putin will stop at Ukraine, I don’t think we’re in a rational actor paradigm.

I was on a panel with a very smart colleague of mine, we were talking to students. And I was talking from my, I’m sure, overly emotional perspective. I’m an intellectual historian, I deal with many things that are fuzzy. And he was a game theorist dealing with his world as a chess match. I just felt all the things he’s say-

Nobody wants to be invaded by Russia. It’s a different society, it’s a different political culture. Ukrainians have worked a lot on this democracy, it’s not perfect. They’re struggling with corruption, but they have developed an extraordinary civil society, which was the miracle of the Maidan. They are coming together to say, no, this isn’t what we want

ing are very smart. But they seemed irrelevant to me, because I thought that the game theory works, if you’re playing chess and everyone’s agreed on the rules. But what if somebody decides to take the board and throw it up and slash all the pieces? Then it doesn’t help. What if we’re outside the realm of rationality? And so, my feeling is that in some way somebody has to put a stop to Putin. I think he could easily blow up the world. I don’t see any reason that he would stop at the borders of NATO. I’m also influenced because I’m a historian of World War II. So in my mind, I’m like, oh, my God! We’re in 1939! But with the internet, we can see it all in real time. Imagine if in 1939 there were internet, you could watch everything live streamed.

Do you think in Putin’s mind there is some sort of unfinished business in Ukraine?

Putin has unfinished business in the world. I mean, he has issues, he has resentments. He has constant need to prove his masculinity in this, like, “oh, I’m not a woman, I don’t have bad days”. I mean, all of this vulgarity, that he and [Alexander] Lukashenko and [Donald] Trump share, like you have to humiliate women, you have to show that you’re dominant, this obsession with being respected, with not being given enough respect. The analysis that my Russian friends tend to give about what really upsets Putin about Ukraine—nobody has access to his soul, so this is all speculation—is the fear that Maidan could happen in Russia. In some sense, what Masha Gessen [writer activist critical of Putin] really wanted to know while she was in Russia during the protests in 2011-12 was why they failed and the Maidan succeeded. As a generalisation, nothing ever succeeds perfectly. What Masha wanted to know is how they were able to do it in Ukraine, and why were we not able to do it in Russia.

I remember after the Maidan, I was at a conference in Russia—the last time I was in Russia when it was already kind of sketchy. And I saw there a colleague from Petersburg I hadn’t seen in years. And he was talking about the Maidan, and he said all of us, we watched the Maidan ecstatically. And I had to laugh: “Yes, all of you, that’s you and your 24 friends.” But for the Russian intelligentsia, the Maidan was the possibility. And I think it might have been the same thing for Putin. But in the opposite way—it might have been a source of terror, that they’ve created this president, it was something done by people who may be just entirely too similar to his people and, therefore, a particular threat. ■

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SALON



SHILPA GUPTA

THE LIGHTNESS OF DISSENT

Shilpa Gupta's immersive works interrogate censorship and celebrate language

By Shaikh Ayaz

Exhibited in Edinburgh, Kochi, Antwerp, Dallas, at the Venice Biennale and most recently at the Barbican Centre in London, artist Shilpa Gupta's *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2017-18) is a model of sublime subversion. An ode to 100 poets across history who have spoken truth to power, the 70-minute sound installation hands the mike back to where it belongs—persecuted poets and thinkers. Many of them had to pay the price of dissent with their lives, including the 14th-century Azerbaijani poet Imadaddin Nasimi whose line, “Both worlds can fit within me/ But in this world, I cannot fit” gives Gupta's work its tongue-in-cheek title. “Poets are a society's voice. What if their voice, no matter how critical, is silenced? We would end up living in a world of lies, compromises and little imagination. For me, this work has been an act of listening, particularly at a time when free speech is under attack and truth has become malleable in the hands of those in power,” says Gupta, who is both soft-spoken and outspoken during our interaction at her studio in Mumbai.

An extended book version of *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* is now in the works. Edited in collaboration with writer Salil Tripathi, the volume contains 58 revolutionary poems by poets such as Angel Cuadra, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Nguyen Chi Thien, Kazi

Nazrul Islam, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Abdellatif Laabi and of course, Imadaddin Nasimi. The text is interspersed with Gupta's simple yet powerful drawings, which depict the plight of the poets—the Palestinian poet-activist Dareen Tatour under house arrest, the Pakistani anti-establishment poet Habib Jalib manhandled by the police, the dissident South Korean writer Kim Chi-ha being hugged by his wife, and the cops clamping down on demonstrators supporting the 81-year-old Telugu poet Varavara Rao. “The intention with this project was to share the research we have gathered over several years and see if it was possible to assemble different voices that have stood alongside those who have risked themselves, sometimes even unknowingly, while showing a mirror to their communities,” she says.

For Gupta, freedom of speech is not just a motif but also a statement of faith. The horrors of censorship and extremism have long worried her, ever since she first read George Orwell and Munshi Premchand (her mother's favourite author). The latter was even accused of sedition. She explains, “Ten years ago, if you had asked someone on the street, ‘What's sedition?’ No one would have known. Today, it's a common word, being wielded against those who speak differently.”

Reviewing her recently concluded show *Sun at Night* in London where *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot*

Fit was received with much acclaim, *The Guardian* described her art as “quietly heroic”. Some of that heroism is fuelled in part by her persistent interrogation of her own personal identity. “Nobody takes you for who you are. Isn’t that true, especially in South Asia?” she asks. “When I started out my work was different and couldn’t fit into any preconceived structure. I was instantly boxed into categories. Someone called me a ‘conceptual artist,’ someone else said, ‘new media/installation artist’ or ‘woman artist’. Society always has this need to classify which becomes very limiting.” These thoughts about selfhood, freedom, gender and the relationship between language and knowledge grew into a project called *Someone Else* (2011). Cast out of stainless steel, the installation featured 100 authors who have written under pseudonyms because of the risks involved in using their real names. For example, Emily Brontë adopted the very “Christian and masculine” pen name Ellis Bell to deflate gender bias.

Someone Else is one in a long list of Gupta’s works over the last two decades that have acquired unprecedented relevance in a world caught in an endless cycle of conflict and violence. It is hard to imagine another Indian artist who has pursued such an idiosyncratic approach to art. Relying on a variety of media that includes performance-based experiences, installation, LED lights, sound clips and video projections, her audience-friendly and often immersive art is built like thought paradoxes and puzzles, recalling the avant-garde ethos of Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Damien Hirst and Yoko Ono. Take *Speaking Wall* (2009-10), for example. This instructive installation motivated participants to stand on a narrow line of brick steps facing a wall while an LCD screen lobbed a set of commands. So irreverent was the concept that you could have almost missed its veiled critique—the impermanence and futility of constructed borders. The idea was born out of a casual remark by the Pakistani filmmaker Farzad Nabi during her road trip from Lahore to Wagah. “What stayed with me was when he said that his grandmother still had the key to her house in Kashmir,” says Gupta, who has done extensive work in both Kashmir and Bangladesh, giving rise to a number of works based on national borders. She first visited Bangladesh in 2013 and was surprised to see marijuana growing near the border checkpoints. Back in her studio, she made drawings out of marijuana ink. Combining photographs, interviews and historical records, she went on to explore the idea of no man’s land. Visiting *chitmahals*, or enclaves on both sides of the border she realised the extent to which this lingering dispute from the days of the Independence has impacted the lives of those stranded when the map



“POETS ARE A SOCIETY’S VOICE. WHAT IF THEIR VOICE, NO MATTER HOW COMPROMISES AND LITTLE IMAGINATION. FOR ME, THIS

was redrawn. One of her performance-based installations saw her use handwoven fabric to underline the political reality of the Indo-Bangladesh border, which at 4096 km remains one of the largest fenced boundaries of its kind in the world. Another time, she invited 100 people to draw their version of the Indian map, which was then traced and layered on top of each other using carbon paper. Besides site-specific installations, the artist also engages with outdoor neon-based light projects. These often include enigmatic aphorisms that make you pause and ponder. One installed near the Bandra seafront, written in a mix of English, Urdu and Hindi, read, “I live under your sky too,” while another reminded viewers, “We change each other.”

“I am interested in the relationship between text and image and how the act of reading can either inform or constrain,” says the 46-year-old, adding, “What these works have in common is that they are about persistence of beliefs, of dreams, of mobility, which make us what we are as individuals. When systems attempt to map, graph and tabulate to seek control, people masquerade, infiltrate and catapult.” Despite her constant engagement with politics, Gupta insists that she’s not comfortable with that word. “The moment you say ‘political’ it moves away from everyday life,” she argues. “I would say that we are a part of the system that makes us feel like passive participants. However, in life, all choices we make and navigate through are governed by systems of thinking



(L-R) *FOR, IN YOUR TONGUE, I CANNOT FIT; SPEAKING WALL*
BY SHILPA GUPTA

CRITICAL, IS SILENCED? WE WOULD END UP LIVING IN A WORLD OF LIES.
WORK HAS BEEN AN ACT OF LISTENING" SHILPA GUPTA artist

and being. You know about the Milgram experiment where you are made to do things that run counter to your belief systems? I find that to be a useful reference today, as human beings seem to have become automated, giving up their own sense of logic." *Threat* (2008-09) addressed this very theme as it tried to reconnect humans with each other, reminding them of their shared attributes rather than differences. The installation was also a response to the growing Islamophobia in the post-9/11 era. Playful and yet serious in its intent, Gupta placed bars of skin-colour soap with 'threat' printed on it. She encouraged viewers to take one bar with them as they walked out of the gallery. So, one by one, with efforts from each of us, the threat simply vanished.

Gupta's art is neither provocative nor elitist, as she often involves the viewers to unpack her brainteasers. She likes to treat the audience as fellow travellers and co-conspirators more than just as casual observers. "As an artist, I am not above anyone else. For me, it's about creating a worldview and then sharing something that I have felt with others. It's like a proposition. The viewer and I are walking alongside and maybe he/she can see what I have seen. We both can learn from each other's journey." With her experiments, she says she wants to reduce the distance between her art and the spectator. "When I first went to Kashmir I was greeted with 'Bambai se aaya mera dost.' That immediately put me in a

comfort zone. I feel we must do the same with others. Art must also break barriers instead of creating new ones," says Gupta, who clearly thrives on audience feedback. One of her breakout experiments, *Blame* (2002-04) saw her commute on Mumbai's local train as a saleswoman peddling bottles containing simulated blood. "There were a range of reactions. Some ignored me, others were uncomfortable, some spoke with me and someone even bought a 'Blame' bottle. The Gujarat riots had just happened and there was a sense of tension and urgency in the air."

Gupta is A graduate of the Sir JJ School of Fine Arts, Mumbai. After graduating in 1997, she initially worked as a graphics and web designer—where she got her first taste of technology. Since then, she has tended to combine new media and fine arts with startling results. Born and brought up in Mumbai's Bandra neighbourhood, she was a school topper who shocked her conservative parents one fine day by announcing her decision to take up art.

"They just felt I would have an uncertain future as an artist and were hoping that I would become a doctor instead," she recalls. "And then, when I entered art school it was in a bit of a vacuum. Just a year before I joined Mr Prabhakar Kolte, who was known as a great teacher and orator, had left and for good or bad, the whole abstraction wave sort of skipped me. I do regret not having Kolte sir as my teacher though," muses Gupta.

Her professors couldn't understand why she was more interested in something called new media when she was so good at drawing. "All my teachers were really empathetic but they would look at my experiments and say, 'Good. *Par yeh sab ghar pe karo* (But do all this at home).'" Gupta, who became a full-time artist in 2005, admits that she has always felt like an outsider in the art world, "That allows for a sense of lightness and one is not weighed down by structures." She has stayed away from the commercial landscape, remaining unfazed against the vagaries of the art market. Sitting in her studio, which doubles up as her private sanctuary, she reflects, "Art is about loving, and auctions about leaving." In retrospect, she says that after art school she thought she would have a job and make art over the weekend. "Today, I feel privileged to be a professional artist. When many people are wrestling with set routines, I am grateful to be in a space of imagination and freedom rather than numbers and expectations of the market." ■



GARDEN AS RE

Ruchira Gupta's watercolour paintings follow the

By Gloria Steinem

IN RUCHIRA GUPTA'S series of magical watercolours—*In the Garden at Forbesganj*—we are invited to share in a very personal garden at a very unsettled time. Caught in the displacement and withdrawal of the first year of Covid, Gupta left New York to return to her childhood home in a small agricultural town in Bihar. There, in the comfort of her family and village community, she overcame her grief for the suffering of the pandemic-stricken world.

Created during an unimagined time, a time of enforced barriers and social isolation, the 35 paintings of *In the Garden at Forbesganj* transport us to a world of open gates and community. As a lifelong activist, Gupta suggests that if we are able to make gardens that are open, maybe we can do that for human beings too. Her garden paintings call us to see beyond our fears and follow the freedom of flowers, trees—the creations of nature—including the immutable community life of her remote childhood home in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Gupta's paintings show us each a personal garden that is only our own. Her Forbesganj garden reminds me of my first and deepest image of a garden. I saw that everything grew toward the sun, flowers, trees—and people. I understood without knowing it then that our natural world is bottom up, not top down.

Gupta gathers flowers, insects, animals and people—indoors as well as outdoors—in her paintings. All these living beings love each other's company—without any sense of hierarchy. I see mango trees, frogs, water, sun, little girls with skinned knees, fairies and the white ghost-like spirits of ancestors camouflaged between the green leaves, birds, flowers and humans.

In these mystical paintings, villagers follow unstoppable routines—a man takes his daughter home on his cycle, a storyteller sings a song from his scroll, a woman opens a small

shop on a bamboo platform, worshippers come and leave offerings to a tree, street musicians and fruit-sellers stand outside a barber's shop, open for business.

Inside the house, the family of kin and community also follows an unchanging schedule set by sunrise and sunset. The day begins in the garden—gathering fruits, sweeping leaves, making a sacred *tulsi* leaf tisane and hanging clothes to dry. It continues with work—reading, writing, cooking, gardening and pruning. And ends with conversations, food and sleep.

Memory too plays its part. The paintings capture the slow and languid rhythm of a family as seen from the eyes of a child both in the past and present. Old bits of embroidery, photographs, books, furniture, utensils, merge with plants and trees that still stand tall and were part of a forgotten childhood.

In a remarkable and delightful way, Gupta merges the familiar and reassuring pattern of the garden and the childhood house. In her paintings, the life of plants and the life of human beings intertwine. Flowers blossom as do humans. Both mingle against backdrops of grass and trees, along with snails, lizards, mongoose, dragonflies, ants, butterflies and birds.

Prabhakar Kamble, the curator, puts it aptly, "Artists paint gardens from the home. Ruchira paints the home from the garden."

Gupta's garden is planted by her mother, on land that her ancestors have inhabited for over a century. I have visited her home and garden often over two decades and sat with her family, drinking tea, surrounded by these plants, flowers and trees.

I can see the influence of the socialist writers, poets and politicians, who lived in this very house, in her work and paintings. She has a way of seeing that makes visible the work and life of the village community and the people who work in her home. Her paintings reflect her deep love of the land and its humans, showing the inter-dependence and



FUGE

freedom of nature

inter-connectedness of every living being.

As I sit in my New York apartment, Gupta's paintings remind me of an India that I love because of its Gandhian simplicity, equality in community and ecological traditions. Her paintings have a universal appeal transcending oceans and time.

This is a natural world that invites us to enter, from the chair to the big red flower that looks like a sheltering umbrella. Childhood homes are seldom revisited. Not only does Gupta revisit her childhood home, but she takes us with her to our own childhood.

We are reminded that even what is perishable is never lost through the gifts of memory. Memory's gift in Gupta's garden overcomes loss through the power of resilience. We see rebirth in every dynamic swirl of leaf and grass captured by her brushstrokes as she paints the lush monsoon.

AS WE WALK in the bounty of her garden, we stumble upon a blue sky garden made of tears. The garden—open to all—now creates a place for Gupta's lamentation on the starvation and deaths from Covid times. Paradise is ruptured by the grief of personal loss, and the sharp pain of remembering a young girl raped and killed in the chaos of the lockdown.

She grieves for the little girl, for the loss of friends from Covid and for the hunger among the victims of sex trafficking, whom she serves. We learn that the tragedy comes not from the natural cycle of life and death and rebirth, but from the unnatural shortening of life by the loss of sun, water, care and empathy.

The garden offers a refuge to experience tragedy. The harmony of the garden lulls us to seed both the endurance and hope that activism in our complex world asks from us. *In the Garden at Forbesganj* invites us to a quieter world moderated by daily customs, pieties, mementos, and histories. It embeds, without



(L-R) OLD BOOKS; STORYTELLER; MEMOIRS WITH MY FATHER; WALK IN THE RAIN BY RUCHIRA GUPTA

shouting, just like Gupta's daily activism to provide food and housing to the most vulnerable women during Covid.

In a life celebrating wonder, the artist takes us to the deeply intimate healing gardens of our minds. These extraordinary paintings connected to beauty and memory, can give us strength.

Her garden has open gates and no fences. They remind me that there are no nature-made fences on planet Earth, there are no flags or national boundaries, only migratory patterns. They give me hope that if we humans can make gardens that are open, maybe we can do that for planet Earth too.

Her garden paintings are like a call to action saying we as people have to go beyond fences to find the freedom of nature. Gupta reminds us that there is a garden still on earth. She calls on us not to dismantle our beautiful garden on earth for a promised garden in the future or in outer space. She paints hope. Hope that is based in the reality of nature.

Her paintings evoke the words of my mother. When as a very young child, I asked her why people came in different colours, she said, "Because people are like flowers." This has stayed with me. We are all natural and beautiful in our garden on Earth. From Buddha to the Bible, a garden has been the image of Paradise.

Gupta's paintings have taken me to the secret garden in my mind. She hints that what is perishable will be reincarnated again. ■



Gloria Steinem is a feminist, activist and writer. In the Garden at Forbesganj by Ruchira Gupta, curated by Prabhakar Kamble, runs at Gandhi Sangrahalaya, Patna, from March 25 to April 5

THE HOOT AND CA

The 15th Jaipur Literature Festival was more intimate in scale



PERHAPS, THE MOST photographed celebrity at the 15th Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) resided in a scrawny tree just near the entrance of the author's lounge. He saw the world. But not everyone saw him, unless they chose to turn up to look. With his sharp hearing and acute sight, he heard and saw more than most. He was a Spotted Owlet who was privy to all the proceedings below and around him. As speakers walked in and out of the lounge, many eyes turned up to him. When he was not there, a sigh of disappointment would waft into the wind. If he could speak, oh, the secrets he could reveal.

He would notice the various tics of the speakers and performers. He would discern the common traits between authors and his own species. Like him, the author-artist is largely a solitary creature who most often lives alone, or in pairs. Owls and authors tend to be creatures of the night, who have all seeing eyes. They are considered to be all knowing, but can also be petty and vicious and are known for taking over the nests of others. When they come together they form a parliament. Once a subcommittee has been identified, most stay loyal to these and seldom seek out others. Many of the speakers, of course, have been friends for decades and the Owlet would see them take to each other like dandelions in the wind. Old friends would gather and wander off together to find a moment of communion. The Owlet was also witness to all the egos and gossip. He would find it hard to keep track of it all, given that he had two years of doings and undoings to catch up on.

For many attendees and speakers, this is half the fun of an on ground festival. On one hand it is the exalted world, which is in the higher pursuit of ideas and words and language and revelation, and on the other it is simply about money and business, and whose book is selling the most, who is getting it on with whom, and who said what to whom. The Owlet would realise that it is this mingling of the 'high' and the 'low', that is the fun of a festival.

WHETHER YOU enjoyed JLF 2022 depended on how you like it. Do you revel in the size and scale of the Kumbh Mela? Or do you prefer the buzz of drawing room soirees? Do you like the shimmy of a peak-hour Metro commute? Or do you prefer a stroll? The recently concluded JLF (March 10-14) replaced scale with intimacy, where there was once a scramble, now there was space.

Over the last decade, JLF has flaunted itself as the "world's biggest free literary festival," with the crowds and speaker

line-up endowing this reputation. But in its 15th year, like everything else in 2022, JLF had to contend with a new reality. Since it could no longer go just for bigger, it had to go for smarter as well. Held for the first time at Hotel Clarks Amer, after 14 years at Diggi Palace, the "world's biggest hybrid literature festival" hosted around 600 speakers, artists and performers, and included both offline and online events.

JLF 2022 proved what we've known for the last two years, the need for face-to-face interaction and the inadequacy of a solely online world. The online sessions have their own merits, as they are less performative and more natural. But they are no substitute for on-ground and in-the-flesh events.

It is all too easy to dismiss literature festivals but the forced break reminds us why we need them—to give flesh to the skeleton of ideas, for the solitary act of reading and writing to be embodied. It is at a literature festival, where a college student can ambush authors like William Dalrymple and Manu S Pillai, and ask with confidence, "Didn't Aurangzeb reach south India?" It is where fans will demand selfies with authors claiming, "I spent 15 hours reading his book, he can spend a minute for a photo." It is at a festival where you might suddenly find yourself in a queue with a Nobel prize winning author.

A festival is a notoriously hierarchical place where the colour

JLF 2022 PROVED WHAT WE'VE KNOWN FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS, THE NEED FOR FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION AND THE INADEQUACY OF A SOLELY ONLINE WORLD. THE ONLINE SESSIONS HAVE THEIR OWN MERITS, AS THEY ARE LESS PERFORMATIVE AND MORE NATURAL. BUT THEY ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR ON-GROUND AND IN-THE-FLESH EVENTS



LL OF BOOKS

and more Indian in content **By Nandini Nair**

of your lanyard determines your access to different festival nooks, but in its best moments, a literature festival is where readers lay claim to authors, and where authors respect and acknowledge this, knowing all too well, that it is readers who make them who they are.

A few years ago, every edition came to be known for that one defining controversy, this edition ran smoothly enough, except for a kerfuffle at the very start. The loudest murmurs of dissent arose in the evenings when authors found themselves without drinks at hand.

WITH MANY OF the international celebrity names appearing online—such as Abdulrazak Gurnah and Damon Galgut—the on-ground festival had a more Indian texture. Ten sessions on Indian art history (a first for the festival) showcased the scale of our arts and brought together leading art historians such as BN Goswamy and Partha Mitter.

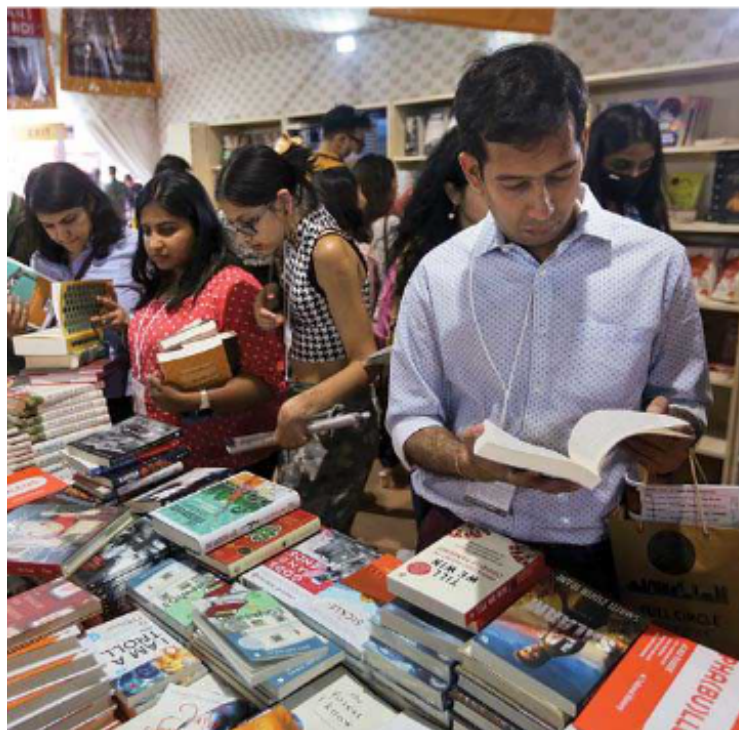
The joy of JLF has always been the variety on offer in terms of speakers and content. Writer and playwright Farrukh Dhondy emerged as the Duke of Anecdotes just as writer Shobhaa De could be anointed the Countess of One Liners. On and off stage, Dhondy regaled listeners with accounts about

everything from adaptations in Hindi cinema to Ronald Reagan's past. Shobhaa De held forth with student activist Gurmehar Kaur, telling her to live life unapologetically and on her own terms. Smriti Irani's session on her book *Lal Salaam* was as packed as expected. The Minister of Women and Child Development's novel was also the bestseller at the bookshop at the festival grounds. A young volunteer at the shop said that Irani's *Lal Salaam* and Neena Gupta's *Sach Kahun Toh: An Autobiography* were vanishing off shelves. Often described as the "all-time JLF Favourite," Shashi Tharoor lived up to his reputation, with readers and fans flocking to be in his orbit. Abhijit Banerjee's session on his recent book *Cooking to Save Your Life*, illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier, revealed the Nobel prize winner's proclivity for food where the ingredients get an opportunity to sing. The session humanised and intellectualised food.

TRADITIONALLY ALWAYS held in January, a month of mellow sunshine and bracing nights in Jaipur, March often blazed too bright. If JLF is about books and ideas, it is also about seeing and being seen, showing face and seeing face, meeting and greeting. For years, JLF has showcased winter fashion, where the shawls and jackets, boots and coats were in full display. This time around, the *mulmul* and chiffon saree, *chikankari* kurta and sleeveless dresses edged out the silks and wools. Many of the gentlemen arrived with their linen coats and Nehru jackets and stoically sweated through it all. JLF has always been a festival of winter sun, where the most popular stall is the *kulhad chai* sold by moustachioed men. This time around the scramble was for shade, with the sole air conditioned hall becoming the most popular hub.

If JLF has its retinue of fans and followers, it also has its critics and naysayers. And while there will always be the lacklustre session, the garbled conversation, the obvious omissions, there will also be moments of light and sparkle, both on and off stage. Personally, the moments I find most meaningful are seeing young readers buying bags of books at the shops. On a warm Saturday afternoon, a girl, perhaps in college, seemed to doze off in a chair beside me. I didn't really see her pay much attention to the conversation on stage. But then she suddenly awoke and went to her Amazon account on her phone and bought a book, *The First Lady: One Secret Can Bring Down a Government* by James Patterson. I ought not to have been spying on her phone. But like the Owllet, I had a useful vantage point. And it is in these moments—when you encounter readers—that you feel fortunate to be at the Jaipur Literature Festival. ■

The Full Circle Bookstore at the Jaipur Literature Festival, 2022



ASHISH SHARMA

PET INTIMACY

Two anthologies by pet parents pay tribute to beloved dogs and cats

By Ranjit Lal

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC made a lot of lonely people take in stray puppies or kittens for companionship, and those who already had pets (who were delighted with their owners staying home all day) got to know their wards more intimately. But we have been keeping dogs and cats as pets for thousands of years and in these two collections of 45 dog and 32 cat tales, there are essays, short stories, memoirs, photo-features and even verse. Hemali Sodhi and Devapriya Roy have brought together a galaxy of pet lovers to give tribute to their beloved animals.

Both dogs and cats come with their stereotypical characteristics: dogs are exuberant, eager to please and give us unconditional love—something we value above all and usually do not get from our own kind. Cats are cool, independent and may condescend to please you if it pleases them. The most interesting pets of course are those that break these stereotypes, the mavericks: dogs which are stubborn, die-hard mutts who will have their way and maybe even snap at babies, and cats which will sit in your lap purring like miniature steam engines all day without ever slipping out their claws or stalking off rudely even as you murmur sweet nothings to them.

And likewise their owners! Most pet owners gush adoringly over their pets, describing them in saccharine terms, which they would dare not use even for their own children, or most beloved. (If dogs and cats could read I sometimes wonder how embarrassed they might be.) These owners let their pets get away with bad behaviour, and indulge in habits they would never tolerate in their own kith and kin. Unfortunately dogs and cats have shorter lives than us—and



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

there's always heartbreak and trauma waiting around the corner, sometimes never to be gotten over. But then there are those, more grounded types who know that a dog is a dog and a cat is a cat and they must be treated within the norms of their own species.

In both these books, we meet more of the former (marshmallow) type of owner, which is perhaps an indicator of how much we still need the warmth, affection and most of all, perhaps, the companionship of another living breathing entity (especially in these times where everything artificial is up on a pedestal.) I

was amazed at the lengths some owners went; the indulgences they allowed their pets. We had two golden rules for our dogs (two Boxers and a bipolar Labrador): no feeding at the table, and no getting onto beds or chairs—both for very good reasons, for both them and us. A drooling, whining dog looking imploringly at you while you ate (after having just eaten its own meal) kind of puts you off your food (and it is really just trying to claim the “boss” position in your household), and allowing a dog to recline on your bed or sofa is an invitation for ticks and fleas to turn it into an

ashram for themselves and bleed your pet dry. Nor is a drooled-upon pillow the best place to rest your head. We learned both these lessons the hard way.

These two books are as much about the dogs and cats that inhabit them as it is about their owners. The books provide journaling of a type, and can be quite personal. Cats have always had a reputation of being literary muses (you can write/type with a purring cat in your lap, not a slobbering bulldog licking your face) and some of the pieces in *Cat People* are exactly that—literary works, and even short stories. Moreover, many literary leading lights—Doris Lessing for example, were obsessed with cats (and not so much apparently with her own children). And it's often been said that the kind of dog you keep reflects the kind of person you are. Happy-go-lucky foodies will keep Labradors and stern disciplinarians go for Rottweilers or German Shepherds. And of course, we *aam jantago* for Indies.

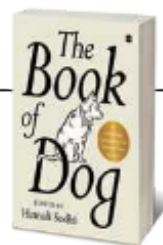
What's upsetting however—and what also emerges from these books—is the number of strays—both dogs and cats—to be found (and sometimes picked up) wandering our streets and in animal shelters. Most of these have descended from generations of strays who have lived on the streets (and know how to cross roads), the more unfortunate are abandoned by their owners—for one reason or another. One of the fall-outs of the post-lockdown era—those who picked up kittens and puppies during

the lockdowns—are now shedding them on the streets to fend for themselves as they return to their own lives, which in turn tells us a lot about their own character.

Also reflecting our own character perhaps is the fact that there are zero pieces focussed on disciplining our pets; an essay or two on how to make a sociopathic pet fit for company (both human and animal) would have been very practical and useful indeed. There are, however, heart-warming stories of how traumatised, petrified puppies and kittens, rescued from the gutter, have with the application of copious love, patience, care, time and, I suspect, large quantities of biscuits and fish, turned into confident, happy animals.

I have deliberately refrained from mentioning the names of some of the standout contributors to this book, only because some as deserving will invariably get left out: all in all the pieces are engaging, personal, interestingly written and original; a few, alas, remind me of essays written in school. None fall short on emotion.

As dogs and cats are considered like chalk and cheese, are “cat people” differ-



THE BOOK OF THE DOG
Edited by Hemali Sodhi

Harper Collins
311 pages | ₹699



CAT PEOPLE
Edited by Devapriya Roy

Simon & Schuster
281 pages | ₹499

ent from “dog people” in a similar way and will the twain ever meet? I think one of the best takeaways from these two books is that as a reader you can marry the two and benefit hugely from the match. From dogs you get warmth, unconditional love (which means forgotten anniversaries and temper tantrums are quickly forgiven and forgotten), the desire to please and sheer *joie de vivre*; from cats you learn to be a cool customer who takes no bullshit from anyone and who values independence above all. Then, of course,

there are those who have kept both dogs and cats as pets, both separately and at the same time. Brought up together in the same house, dogs and cats will get on with one another despite the diktats of their glorious history of hostility. (Is there a lesson in this for us?) What is even more fascinating are the cases where dogs, living with cats, behave more like them than they do themselves—and vice versa. (I though I suspect there would be fewer cats that behave like dogs than the other way around.)

Most dog and cat owners these days call themselves “pet parents”, some even refer to their wards as their “children” and many of the contributors to this book are no exception. Personally, I would draw the line here; I would willingly accept being called a dog owner, or dog-lover or even a dog carer but never a dog (or should that be god?) father—even though I have talked a lot of toddler gibberish to my dogs.

For anyone interested in our favourite domestic pets, both these books will make rewarding reading: there's literary merit, originality, some very interesting characters (canine, feline and human) and an insight on how these animals can insert themselves into, and change, our lives and hearts forever, usually in the best, happiest way possible. ■

Hemali Sodhi with Simba



Courtesy HEMALI SODHI

THE BEST TAKEAWAY FROM THESE TWO BOOKS IS THAT AS A READER YOU CAN MARRY THE TWO AND BENEFIT HUGELY FROM THE MATCH. FROM DOGS YOU GET WARMTH, UNCONDITIONAL LOVE; FROM CATS YOU LEARN TO BE A COOL CUSTOMER WHO VALUES INDEPENDENCE ABOVE ALL.

Life Is Everything

A storyteller objectifies human nature

By Madhulika Liddle



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

A MERICAN POET AND short story writer Raymond Carver had once said, "It's possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power."

An observation that is borne out well by Carlo Pizzati in *A History of Objects: A Collection of Stories*. Indeed, just about every conceivable type of object exists within the pages of this slim book. There are toys here, and works of art; pieces of clothing; electronic equipment; furniture. Even—so appropriate, given the times we live in—a mask and a bottle of hand sanitiser.

All of them, in some way or the other, play an important part in the story to which they lend their name. Some, like the coconut scraper, the splint, and the smartphone, are the very focus of the story. Others (and these, in fact, are in the majority) appear only briefly in the story: one sentence or two, at the most a paragraph—but in that brief mention, those few sentences, they cement their position in the story. As something that could change lives.

There is the bottle of hand sanitiser, for instance, which upturns the power equation between a moneyed family and its driver. Or the teddy bear, mute witness to a momentous encounter, a turning point in a young woman's life. The bench, at a literature festival, that

sparks off a tense encounter, or the VHS tape, not important in itself, but the case of which is used to hide something potentially lethal.

Each story, no more than ten pages long (most are shorter), is named for an object, although how and where that object will appear within the story cannot be predicted, just as the story itself cannot be predicted. Pizzati traverses the world; switches perspectives; speaks now as a man, now as a woman; is often witty but manages, too, to produce tales that are sometimes both disturbing as well as poignant and insightful.

Beyond the fact that they are all about objects, the insight these stories offer is possibly their most visible hallmark. In subtle ways, each story here offers something by way of a glimpse into human nature. The need of a teenager, painfully aware of her own poverty compared to the

wealth of her luxury-loving friends, to somehow match them in 'The Sweater'. Or the mad race to garner social media engagement by an Instagram-obsessed couple in 'The Smartphone'. The shock to the sense of superiority, and the resultant rush to redeem it, in 'The Hand Sanitizer'. Or the many nuances of lost love that are revealed through 'The Slippers', 'The Shoes', and 'The Jade Stone'.

More often than not, Pizzati uses wit to shine the light on an object. Many of these stories have a quirky twist to them; 'The Splint', for example, about a man who is convinced he has been given another chance at life—all because of a splint on a broken finger. Or 'The Diaper', where, in the midst of changing diapers, a man decides to turn vegetarian. None of these witty stories are the laugh-at-every-line type; the humour, often black (or at least charcoal), comes in briefly but is impactful. One sudden twist at the end of a story, and the story itself acquires a whole new dimension.

A History of Objects is delightful and quirky, poignant and thought-provoking, all at the same time. These are thoroughly entertaining, deeply satisfying stories, an exploration of the world of inanimate objects. In a literature that tends to place a lot of emphasis on characters and their development, Pizzati's stories are a refreshing step to the side. An oblique, out-of-the-box look at objects rather than people. ■



**A HISTORY OF OBJECTS
A COLLECTION OF STORIES**
Carlo Pizzati

HarperCollins
220 Pages | ₹399

The Reckoning

Isabel Allende's new novel is about a woman steeped in history

By Sharanya Manivannan



VIOLETA

Isabel Allende

Translated by Frances Riddle

Bloomsbury
320 Pages | £7.99

VIOLETA DEL VALLE was born during the pandemic of the 1920s, and died during the pandemic of the 2020s. The eponymous, fictional narrator of Chilean novelist Isabel Allende's latest book, translated from Spanish by Frances Riddle, is touted as having lived an extraordinary life. But does length alone make a life extraordinary?

Violeta is about a person who is surrounded by idiosyncratic people: people quite unlike her white, straight, well-to-do and solipsistic self. The lesbian feminist Teresa, the indigenous healer Yaima, Violeta's own son the journalist and activist Juan Martín—these and many other characters populate this novel. The book is in the form of a long letter to the narrator's grandson, Camilo. As Violeta tells the story of her life in hindsight, decades after a great change of heart, she is able to express admiration for those she knew. But over the course of that life, she repeatedly makes choices that show that the influence of those people made very little impact on who she chose to be, for the most part.

She marries into a family of Nazi sympathisers and doesn't give it much thought. She is full of internalised misogyny, and fails to see the implications of this in her own life and in the domestic violence she experiences. At the same time, she has progressive views on sex, abortion and divorce (which is not legalised in Chile until she is 84 years old). Curiously, Chile is not named in this book. The lack of nomenclature has

a more egregious component, which ties in to her casual and overt racism: despite claiming to have “learned to identify [stars] by both their classical and indigenous names,” she never names the indigenous people of the region she grows up in, or their language. She's a lousy mother, too obsessed with the horrible man who is her children's father to do right by them. She votes for the right-wing. It is 1983, when she is her sixties and the reader is far into the novel, when Violeta begins to understand there is something erroneous about how she has chosen to live. She reckons with her privilege, contemplates her complicity, and thereafter embarks on a life of philanthropy. Hints of who she is deep down rise up anyway: for instance, she remains classist until death (“that dump... I mean, your community,”

she says to Camilo).

She is, in short, a highly recognisable and unexceptional character—the world is full of Violetas.

Allende has created unique personalities across her celebrated career: often, brave spirited women and girls. With *Violeta del Valle*, however, the risks of writing an unlikable narrator just do not pay off. The distorted lens of a narrative in the voice of an unpleasant and uninteresting character does not illuminate anything afresh. In *Violeta* is another self-involved person who is able to maintain a distance from the events around her, and finally starts to see beyond her own nose, and somehow still centre her perspective—what's new about that?

This unlikable narrator lives for a century, and the reader often just can't wait for her story to end. But if Violeta

has a message that is conveyed regardless, it is this: life's arc is long, and while one is alive it is not too late to learn or to turn over a new leaf. *Violeta* is a senior citizen when she finally begins to use her resources to create good, especially for other women. Her rich amorous life too goes on for decades. She starts over several times and grows from her personal tragedies. As a character, she is mediocre, by her own admission. But as her therapist says, “all lives are banal and we're all mediocre”. Funnily enough, the patience it takes to wade through the novel and the ultimate moral one infers from it share a note: keep going, keep trying, it's not over until it's over. ■

GETTY IMAGES



STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI



Sparkling Star

She has homes in Chennai, Hyderabad and Mumbai, and necessarily so, given the work coming her way since she starred in the Tamil movie, *Kaatru Veliyidai* in 2017. "I always wanted to be a Mani Ratnam heroine," says Aditi Rao Hydari, who is finally getting the due that the Hindi film industry was unable to give her. "Suddenly, a whole new world opened up for me, people started choosing me. Quite often, we're treated as replaceable objects, just as a body and a face that fits for now," she says. The Hindi film industry was always unsure of what to do with her, though she has worked with the finest directors, from Sanjay Leela Bhansali to Imtiaz Ali. But Mani's epic romance made her a pan-Indian heroine of note. Moving easily and elegantly between languages and industries in the past few years, she has done *Sufiyum Sujatayum* (2020) in Malayalam, *Maha Samudram* (2021) in Telugu and *Geeli Puchi?*, Neeraj Ghaywan's outstanding short in *Ajeeb Daastaans* (2021), in Hindi. With her latest Tamil film *Hey! Sinamika*, with her "homie" Dulquer Salmaan (he calls her "Her Royal Highness" and she calls him "DQ"), she is now so busy that Bollywood has to really make it worth her while to stay in Mumbai. The Lady Shri Ram College graduate just wrapped a series for Vikramaditya Motwane, has another two series in the offing and a film with Vijay Sethupathi. After years of being pinched on the cheek and patted on the head, and told she was good, but cast erratically,

Aditi now has roles written for her. Did she ever lose faith in herself in the 11 years she has been in the industry? "Never," she says, "even when somebody has behaved like a jackass, I know it's because of the sickness in their head. There are days when I've wept about how can people be so ruthless, so manipulative, but I don't give them space in my heart or head." The last few years, she says, have given her a *suraksha kawach* (protective shield) so she encounters fewer weirdos, as she calls them. That is why critical and commercial acclaim is so important for actors. "Earlier, people would tell me they'd love to work with me, but nothing would come of it. But now if they say they'll send something for me to read, it usually happens. Maybe, not so much in Hindi, but 100 per cent in Tamil and Telugu," she says. Being an alumna of the Mani Ratnam school of films also helps and connects her to such extraordinary talents as Dulquer and Vikram Prabhu (also, the legendary Sivaji Ganesan's grandson). She loves the discerning audience in Tamil cinema. "I give a lot of love, but I like a lot of love as well. That's part of being an actor. What you mean to fans in every industry is different," she says.

83 Again

Kabir Khan's *83* is an extraordinary film that didn't get enough love in theatres, thanks to yet another Covid-19 wave. It's a well-told story, with brilliant performances, and captures the spirit of pre-

liberalisation India. India was not yet a world power in cricket, and the team led by Kapil Dev found it tough to convince the snooty establishment in England that it meant business. It is difficult to imagine for a post-IPL generation that Team India didn't even get a liveable allowance, or that World Cup matches were not shown live until Indira Gandhi decided it would be a good distraction from politics, or that cricket was not considered a financially viable profession. The movie will get its world television premiere via *Star Gold* on March 20.

Scene That

Naveen Andrews returns to our screens in a major role after the ABC series *Lost* (2004-10) with *The Dropout*, playing Sunny Balwani, who was the partner of Elizabeth Holmes. Holmes, a Stanford University dropout, was credited with inventing a new way of testing blood without a syringe and creating a high-value startup, Theranos. Balwani, 19 years her senior, was her cofounder and COO, and now faces a criminal trial even as Holmes faces a possible 20 years in prison. Theirs was an odd relationship, kept secret from everyone. Amanda Seyfried is quite stunning as the driven Holmes and Andrews just slips into his shadowy role with ease. The Hulu series, seen in India on Disney+ Hotstar, reflects the diversity of the startup world with a starring role for Utkarsh Ambudkar as well. The more America changes, the more it will be reflected onscreen. ■



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